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RICHARD COBDEN AND THE FREE TRADERS.

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MEMORABLE MEN OF THE NINETEENTH  
CENTURY.

*University of Chattanooga.*  
IV.

RICHARD COBDEN  
AND THE FREE TRADERS.

BY  
LEWIS APJOHN.  
1891



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## Preface.

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WE have as yet no satisfactory LIFE of RICHARD COBDEN, and no systematic arrangement of his correspondence such as might serve to present to us a faithful picture of the man and his work. This is the more remarkable, in view of the fact that the leader of the Free Trade movement in England, who occupied one of the most prominent positions in the arena of politics during more than a quarter of a century, was continually before the public, on the platform or in the press, and maintained a regular and active interchange of opinions with some of the ablest men of the day. It is something like a reproach to his fellow-countrymen that they should so long have been willing to dispense with a worthy biography of this patriotic Englishman, which would be at the same time highly attractive and extremely valuable.

There are, it is true, printed collections of Cobden's speeches on various occasions, and of his political writings—not exhaustive, but containing the best of what an ordinary reader would care to make himself acquainted with. There is also the very estimable volume by Mr. Thorold Rogers,

on *Cobden and Political Opinion*; and there are, in addition, a number of smaller works on the history of the agitation against the old protective tariffs, some of which, like Mr. Ashworth's *Recollections of Cobden and the League*, and Mr. Mongredien's compact *History of the Free Trade Movement*, are replete with details of a specially interesting kind.

None of these books, however, is in the strict sense of the term a biography, and none of them fills the place which has so unaccountably been left vacant. Mr. Morley's forthcoming volumes may be expected to supply what has long been regarded as a desideratum; and to these volumes the admirers of Cobden must be content to look forward.

I need scarcely add that the following pages do not profess to build on ground which has been marked out for others; nor do they merely set a new roof on old walls and foundations. The subject of this volume has been dealt with as comprehensively as seemed to be possible, without travelling too far from the record; and if in places it overlaps the themes of other volumes which preceded it, the reader will nevertheless find some chapters—such as those treating of the pioneers and forerunners of the Anti-Corn Law League—which have at any rate the merit of comparative freshness.

I have to make special acknowledgment of my debt to Mr. Ashworth for the assistance which I have derived from his personal "Recollections" of Cobden and his colleagues. The information gleaned from his volume, and from other writers on kindred topics, is for the most part indicated in the text, or in foot-notes, which will direct the reader to the principal authorities on the subject.

L. A.



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## CHAPTER I

### THE AGE OF PROTECTION.

**I**T is not an easy thing for the younger men of the present generation to realise the state of affairs in this country before the adoption of the principles of Free Trade, or the vastness of the change which was effected when Protection was abandoned. It is true that we are familiar enough with these terms, and with the two commercial systems to which they are applied. The advocates of protective tariffs are still bold enough to argue their case on public platforms and in print, whilst the same proofs which originally succeeded in breaking down the strongholds of monopoly have now and then to be brought out in defence of the conquered positions. The controversy itself is yet alive; but the long and heroic struggle by which the English people and Government were converted has become a matter of history, and is too often forgotten.

Amongst the most memorable men of the nineteenth century, at any rate in the class of politicians and public economists, we must assuredly count the small and active band who, first by popular agitation, then by a gallant Parliamentary struggle, assailed and demolished the monopolies by which the material growth of the nation had so long been checked.

This volume will record the achievements of Cobden, of his associates in the Anti-Corn Law League, of his friends in and out of Parliament, and will seek to show, as concisely and simply as possible, how we won the battle of Free Trade.

The state of affairs in England at the conclusion of the Napoleonic wars must be borne in mind if we would understand the economical difficulties of the nation, and the peculiarities of the situation in which the Corn Laws assumed their most aggravated form. The previous quarter of a century had not been a time of unexceptional embarrassment and depression. There are always some who thrive at home when their country is engaged in wars abroad, and who make gigantic fortunes when these wars are continued for a long time. Such are the men who trade in arms, clothing, equipments, food, and the various commodities most required in war, whose opportunities of dealing on a large scale are multiplied, who secure vast contracts, and successfully speculate amidst the ever-shifting conditions of the markets. Under these circumstances the food producers were naturally gainers, in proportion as they could command the prices which they thought fit to ask ; and they also strove by speculation to increase their harvest of profits. The landowners, as being the strongest, secured the greater portion of this advantage by raising the rents of their tenants ; and thus it happened that the farmers themselves, reaping little or no fruit from the advanced prices, were not only unable to raise the wages of their labourers, but were, in many cases, compelled (or they thought themselves compelled) to reduce them. The clergy, who derived much of their income from tithes, varying in value with the rents, of course profited in common with the landlords.

Hence the aristocracy, the clergy, the military orders, and a majority of the merchants and manufacturers, were clear gainers by the war. Many emerged from it in 1815 with

vast fortunes ; but meanwhile the people at large, crippled by heavy taxation, by the increased price of the necessities of existence, by the long discouragement of industries not stimulated by war, were brought to poverty and want. Though, in the special channels which have been mentioned, English commerce had prospered in the past five and twenty years, there had been many partial and individual failures. The efforts of Napoleon to shut us out of the Continental markets had not been altogether in vain ; ruin had fallen upon large numbers, spreading its effects in widening circles throughout the community.

With the return of peace, Englishmen had expected an immediate accession of general prosperity. The exceptional and temporary sources of gain were closed, but it was hoped that now at length the activity of trade would revive, that a thousand new markets would be opened to us, that the half-million soldiers who had been supported in the field would at once recruit the industrial classes of the country, and that we should reap the benefit of our grand triumphs, our friendly alliances, and our newly-acquired foreign possessions and colonies.

Sir A. Alison\* draws a striking contrast between the condition of our finances and commerce in 1792 and 1815, which shows the grounds on which these expectations were based—at any rate by the most sanguine Englishmen :—

“The revenue raised by taxation within the year had risen from £19,000,000 in 1792 to £72,000,000 in 1815 ; the total expenditure from taxes and loans had reached, in 1814 and 1815, the enormous amount of £117,000,000 each year. In the latter years of the war Great Britain had above 1,000,000 of men in arms in Europe and Asia ; and besides paying the whole of these immense armaments, she was able to lend £11,000,000 yearly to the Continental Powers ; yet were those copious bleedings so far from having exhausted the capital or resources of the country, that the loan of 1814, although of the enormous amount of £35,000,000, was obtained at the rate of

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\* *History of Europe from 1815 to 1852.* Vol. i., ch. ii.

£4, 11s. 1d. per cent., being a lower rate of interest than had been paid at the commencement of the war. The exports, which in 1792 were £27,000,000, had swelled in 1815 to nearly £58,000,000, official value; the imports had advanced during the same period from £19,000,000 to £32,000,000. The shipping had increased from 1,000,000 to 2,500,000 tons. The population of England had risen from 9,400,000 in 1792 to 18,400,000 in 1815; that of Great Britain and Ireland from 14,000,000 in the former period to 18,000,000 in the latter. Yet, notwithstanding this rapid increase, and the absorption of nearly 500,000 pairs of robust arms in the army, militia, and navy of these islands, the imports of grain had gone on continually diminishing, and had sunk in 1815 to less than 500,000 quarters. And so far was this prodigious expenditure and rapid increase of numbers from having exhausted the resources of the State, that above £6,000,000 annually was raised by the voluntary efforts of the inhabitants, to mitigate the distresses and assuage the sufferings of the poor; and a noble sinking-fund was in existence, which already had reached £16,000,000 a-year, and would certainly, if left to itself, have extinguished the whole public debt by the year 1845. When such had been the prosperity, and so great the progress of the empire, during the continuance of a long and bloody war, in the course of which it had been repeatedly reduced to the very greatest straits, and compelled to fight for very existence against the forces of combined Europe, there seemed to be no possible limits which could be assigned to the prosperity of the State when the contest was over, and the blessings of peace had returned to gladden our own and every other land."

These expectations, however, were doomed to disappointment; and it is easy to see that they were not altogether reasonable. Too much was made of the prospect of new markets for English commodities in our foreign acquisitions, such as India and the West Indies, and our colonies in Australia and elsewhere. The advantage was to come, but not so soon as the sanguine prophets had anticipated. Not only so, but the tide of prosperity ebbed instead of flowing, and this so suddenly and violently that within a few years of the conclusion of peace the country was threatened with general ruin, and a starving populace had to be policed and dragooned into submission. Agriculture and trade suffered alike; the collapse was as disastrous as it was unexpected.

The fact seems to have been that the ports and markets, which had so long been closed to us, were not ready to receive what we sent them, so that the removal of restrictions in some quarters was not sufficient to compensate for the abrupt stoppage of industry in others. Over and above this natural cause of distress, the evil consequences of a long and wild speculation made themselves felt. The gambling of factors, contractors, shippers, and others, who had turned their honest pennies during the war, was followed now by a reaction. Many retired from the scene gorged with wealth; many, caught at an unfavourable moment, had ruined themselves and their creditors; whilst others, again, withdrew from one hazard to another, and, from speculating on the needs and chances of war, began to speculate in the opening up or re-establishing of trade with foreign ports. The haste and over-confidence of merchants and shippers in this latter direction led to serious consequences in the export trade. The exports from England of foreign and colonial produce alone jumped up in the year 1814 to a value of more than nineteen millions sterling. Three years later, when the mistake had become manifest, they fell to a little more than ten millions.

Amidst these discouragements and disasters in the general trade of the country, the owners and cultivators of land saw themselves threatened by similar misfortunes. After the American War of 1812, and the Russian repulse of the French in 1813, corn began to flow towards England in increasing quantities from the United States and the North of Europe, and as a natural result the price of English grain began to fall. In 1812 it had fetched 122s. 8d. a quarter; in 1813 it had fallen to 106s. 6d.; in 1814 to 72s. 1d.; and in 1815 to 63s. 8d. The producers were alarmed, and immediately clamoured for the exclusion of foreign corn whenever the price in the home markets fell under 80s. The response to this demand in Parliament—where, indeed, the

landed interest dominated both Houses—was the Corn Law of 1815. After this, partly from the bad seasons of 1816–1818, but mainly by the operation of the Prohibitory Act, the prices rose again, until in 1817 English wheat sold at more than 112s. a quarter.\*

The Act of 1815 did not pass without strong opposition. In the Commons there were repeated divisions against the limit imposed, as well as upon the principle of exclusion; whilst in the Lords a protest against the measure was formally recorded. Lord Grenville and ten other lords expressed their disagreement in the following terms:—"We cannot persuade ourselves that this law will ever contribute to produce plenty, cheapness, or steadiness of price. So long as it operates at all, its effects must be quite the opposite of these. (Monopoly is the parent of scarcity, of dearness, and of uncertainty.) To cut off any of the sources of supply can only tend to lessen its abundance; to close against ourselves the cheapest market for any commodity must enhance the price at which we purchase it; and to confine the consumer of corn to the produce of his own country is to refuse to ourselves the benefit of that provision which Providence itself has made for equalising to man the variations of season and of climate."

These were admirable arguments for the nation at large, and especially for the classes whose income was barely sufficient to purchase the necessities of existence; but they made little impression on the men who were professedly legislating for their own threatened interests.

Of course the people saw through the new legislation at once. There was no difficulty in perceiving that the prohibition of corn from other countries made the food of Englishmen dearer, profiting the rich at the direct cost of the poor. The fact that thousands of the same men who

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\* *Alison.*



protested against the Corn Law also protested against the introduction of machinery, as tending to keep working-men out of employment, does not diminish the justice or the force of their complaint; and yet it is certain that this complaint was ridiculed as irrational by a large majority of the educated and refined classes of the community. The populace pressed their grievances on their rulers at every opportunity, by agitation, by mob violence, by monster meetings, and by threats; the rulers met argument by contempt, and agitation by sternest repression. Men were imprisoned, blood was shed, and the people were taught by lamentable exhibitions of tyranny that it was not safe to protest against what it was almost impossible to endure. Brutal massacres like that at St. Peter's Field, Manchester, which has come to be known in history as the Massacre of Peterloo, showed to what a length authority can go in vindication of privilege.

—Such, then, was the state of affairs in England which preceded and followed the protective legislation initiated, or definitely confirmed, in 1815. Before we pass on to examine the opposing theories of Protection and Free Trade, and the bitter contest which was waged between them, we may briefly review the Corn Laws as a whole, from a comparatively early date to the eve of their abolition.





## CHAPTER II.

### THE HISTORY OF THE CORN LAWS.

**T**HE Corn Laws were no new infliction upon the country at the beginning of the nineteenth century. They were already active and oppressive in the time of the Stuarts; and no doubt long before that time the periodical recurrence of popular distress had led to changes in the regulations by which food was introduced from foreign countries.

In the seventeenth century, however, not to go any further back, these regulations had become frequent, if not systematic, and Parliament constantly undertook to modify them as occasion required. But the principles on which the modifications were based appear to have been uncertain and capricious. The ports were closed to foreign grain (as in 1680) when wheat was enormously dear, and opened (as in 1690) when the home production had largely increased. With the ports open, bounties were paid to exporters of corn. Between 1715 and 1765, only five harvests are recorded as having been notably bad ones; more than four millions sterling were paid in export bounties; and simultaneously the excess of imports over exports were very considerable.

It is clear that there was no comprehension of sound

economy in these regulations. Indeed, they seem to have been made chiefly to promote the interests of the home producers, and of course they were made by the producers themselves. In 1751 the price of corn was a little over 29s. a quarter. In 1774 it had risen to 51s. a quarter. The imports exceeded the exports; and yet under these circumstances the English producers bitterly complained because the bounties on exports were withdrawn.

The strong contention of landowners and farmers was that agriculture ought to be fostered and encouraged by these bounties, no matter what the price of corn might be. They either could not understand, or they shut their eyes to the fact, that to pay for exporting corn when there was a deficiency in the home markets was to take the food out of the people's mouths and the money out of their pockets at the same time.

An Act passed in 1791 fixed the import duty at 24s. 3d. per quarter, when the selling price in England was under 50s. When the price rose to 50s., the duty was 2s. 6d.; and when it reached 54s., the duty was lowered to a minimum of sixpence. This was a sliding-scale which appeared to its framers to be very reasonable; but the long continuance of the revolutionary wars on the Continent soon threw everything out of gear again. In 1801, the price of corn had risen to the famine price of 155s. per quarter. Next year it fell to 75s. 6d.; and though, by the law above quoted, the import duty was still to be kept at its minimum, the producers demanded that importation should be stopped altogether.

On the re-establishment of peace in 1815, the House of Lords appointed a Committee to take the whole question into consideration, and, as a result, the Government of the day introduced a Bill which provided that the importation of corn should be prohibited whenever the price fell under 80s. a quarter; though it was permitted from our own

colonies until the price had fallen below 67s. This was the proposal of a Tory Cabinet; and nothing could exceed the unpopularity of the measure. The most earnest protests, the most desperate resistance, were made against it in vain. There were riots in London and in the provinces, and sharp struggles in both Houses of Parliament; but the Bill passed by large majorities.

( This Act of 1815 was one of the worst measures ever written in the Statute-Book. It was a monstrous instance of class legislation. Passed by the landowners, it profited them alone, whilst it weighed with cruel severity on the people at large. The clergy, indeed, saw reason to side with the landowners, since the value of their tithes had almost doubled in a quarter of a century; but the farmers, though they believed themselves to be swimming with the classes just mentioned, were really sinking into deeper distress. Their rents had, of course, increased in the same proportion as the tithes; and yet they clung to the idea that the "protection" of their industry must needs bring them profit.

The three harvests which followed the passing of this Act were conspicuously bad; and thus the condemnation of the measure by all just and candid men was promptly emphasized and illustrated. The country was in a state of direst poverty and distress, there was grievous discontent amongst all but the wealthiest classes, and no opportunity was lost of exposing the unjust legislation under which the nation groaned. Nevertheless the law continued in force; for those who suffered most by it, and many of those who wrote or spoke most forcibly against it, were without a voice in the management of public affairs.

The question of free trade in corn, and of free trade generally, was still far from being matured, even in theory and in argument. Manifest as were the evils of the system then in operation, few persons clearly saw the principles on which they must be attacked and overcome; and the few

who did see them were not listened to. Experience is a hard master, but its lessons are not always learned with a rapidity in proportion to their hardness. The distress of the years succeeding the conclusion of peace was usually ascribed to the sacrifices rendered necessary by the prolonged wars with France; and a majority of the preachers, teachers, writers, and orators, on whom the masses depended for their ideas, represented it as a patriotic duty to endure in patience, not to say with gratitude, the burdens imposed by our military triumphs. It was a work of difficulty, a work of slow achievement and extreme odium, to prove that the worst trials of the commonwealth were imposed upon them, without any necessity, by unsound laws, by the greed of dealers, and by the unscrupulous exaction of the rights and privileges of the landowning class. There were not wanting men who undertook to give this proof, and to impress it on the public mind; but more was needed even than the Act of 1815 to make the question ripe for legislative settlement.

In 1822 there was indeed a show of relaxation; for in this measure it was provided that the importation of corn should be allowed whenever the price in the home markets had risen to 70s. At 70s. there was to be a duty 17s. per quarter, falling to 12s. after three months. When the price was between 70s. and 80s. the minimum duty was to be 5s.; and when the price exceeded 80s., the duty was to stand at its minimum of one shilling. This was a nominal concession; but its value may be estimated by the fact that the law was never put in operation, the new scale was never adopted, and the Act of 1815 was practically untouched.

An Act passed in 1828 (the year of Canning's Premiership) considerably relieved the pressure of the existing regulations, and established a scale of duties for imported corn, which, though still acting as a serious obstacle to the introduction of food, were more elastic and less oppressive

than the former scales. One hundred and fifty towns were selected in different parts of the kingdom—ports of entry, where large sales of a speculative character were regularly made, manufacturing towns bringing their supplies from a great distance; inland emporiums, receiving and passing forward the yield of wide agricultural districts; and smaller market towns in the agricultural districts themselves, chiefly supplying consumers without the intermediation of factors. The selling price of wheat in these various classes of towns was regularly noted; and by adding together the totals of the corn sold in all the towns, and the totals of the prices obtained, and dividing the total price by the number of quarters, an average price per quarter was obtained for the purpose of the sliding-scale. When the price so obtained was 66s., on a further average of six weeks' results, the duty on imported corn was 20s. 8d.; and the duty was to rise by one shilling for every shilling of depression in price. But as the price of corn rose in the home markets, the duty was to increase; so that with the average price at 67s. the duty was to fall 2s.; at 68s., the duty fell 2s. more; at 69s., 3s. more; at 70s., 3s. more. When the average price was 71s., the duty was fixed at 6s. 8d.; at 72s., 2s. 8d.; and at 73s. the duty fell to its lowest point—one shilling per quarter.

Of course the duty at its higher figures was simply prohibitive; and practically it was found that foreign wheat did not come into English markets until the home price exceeded 70s. per quarter. Between the passing of the Act of 1828 and the beginning of the year 1841—as appears from returns made to the order of the House of Commons—over 3,907,000 quarters of wheat were admitted to English markets on payment of a duty of 1s.; over 2,788,000 quarters on payment of 2s. 8d.; and over 1,994,000 quarters on payment of 6s. 8d. Out of a total of 11,322,085 quarters admitted in the twelve years, nine millions and a half, or more than eighty per cent., were imported and paid duty

when the English prices were above 70s. per quarter, whilst an altogether inconsiderable quantity entered our markets when the home price had fallen below 60s. Thus the sliding-scale was very little better for English consumers than would have been a law prohibiting importation at 60s., or even 69s. per quarter.

There were, as we have seen, a few points in respect of which the Act of 1828 brought about a better state of things; but the complexity of the sliding-scale, and the constant variation of the duties on imported grain, were attended by several disadvantages. Speculation was of course greatly stimulated; the dealers were always on the alert, now withholding their grain, now pouring it upon the markets; large quantities were held in bond, to be produced only when the duty fell to a remunerative figure. It often happened that a scarcity was aggravated, or even created, by these manœuvres, whilst undoubtedly the speculative transactions had the effect of delaying or preventing the retail distribution of foreign corn when the country most sorely needed it.

The extent to which this injurious traffic in one of the necessities of existence was carried on may be judged from the fact that in one year alone, 1838, the sliding-scale of duties was altered no fewer than thirty-five times, varying within twelve weeks from 20s. 8d. down to 1s., and back to 20s. 8d. again. In this respect the Act of 1828 was distinctly more harassing and vexatious than the Act of 1815, or than the Act of 1822 would have been if it had come into operation; for under both these Acts the duty, once altered, must have remained fixed for a period of three months.

If the Act of 1815 might be described as a Landowners' Monopoly Act, the Act of 1828 deserved the name of a Speculators' Accommodation Act.

As for the general effect of the Corn Laws upon the

supply of grain from the foreign markets to England, it may be mentioned that between the 1st of March, 1831, and the 1st of September, 1838, the duty never fell to its minimum; whilst from July of the first year to the same month in the latter year it was never below 20s. 8d. That is to say, for the whole of these seven years importation was practically forbidden, though from half-a-million to a million quarters of wheat were constantly lying in bonded warehouses, and though the people were all the while at starvation point.

“It cannot be doubted,” a statistical writer said in 1841, “that the country is supplied under this arrangement at the dearest possible rate, and in such a manner as almost to render it totally impracticable for that interchange of commodities to take place which would ensue under a steadier system. If the demand for foreign wheat were only temporary, and sprung up only in seasons of extraordinary scarcity, there might be some ground for leaving the trade in its present unsatisfactory state; but it is now clear that, except in a succession of abundant years, we must resort to other countries, and advantage should be taken of this necessity to create a demand for our manufactures, which can never grow out of the present manner in which we enter foreign markets as purchasers of their agricultural produce.”

In 1840 the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (in the Government of Lord Melbourne) called upon the British consuls at the European ports between St. Petersburg and Antwerp, and at Warsaw, Odessa, and Palermo, for an answer to the following query:—“What quantity of grain, of each kind, could be exported to England, from the country or district in which you reside, if the trade in corn in England were made constantly open, at a moderate duty?” The estimates of the various consuls showed, as a result of their inquiries, that England might reckon upon an annual supply of five million quarters. And yet, as we



have seen, the average supply of foreign grain from every source, during the twelve years ending with 1841, had been considerably under one million quarters a-year.

No wonder public opinion was ripe for a change. And still less wonder that the starving people began to demand, with ever increasing importunity, the abolition of laws under which they endured such terrible hardships.

The principal arguments of a more technical character which were urged against the sliding-scale by men who could not be accused of political bias or controversial prejudice, are succinctly stated by the authority last quoted, in a paper contributed to Charles Knight's *Almanac and Companion* for 1842.

There was first the complaint that the sliding-scale was badly arranged in itself, even if a shifting duty of any kind were necessary. As the scale was settled by the Act of 1828, importation was frequently rendered impossible (or, at any rate, importation beyond the bonded warehouses) by a prohibitive duty, although nominally there was no prohibition. The scale in fact offered a kind of bonus, not on importation, as might have been expected when the country was deficient in corn, but on the withholding of corn from the markets. Dealers were tempted to keep their grain until the price rose to a maximum, or the duty fell to a minimum. They did not pay their duty and distribute their corn even when they could do so with a fair profit, but often, and perhaps generally, held on in the hope of a further change; and thus wheat, of all conceivable commodities, was not the object of reasonable mercantile dealing, but rather of competition and speculative greed.

Again, assuming that the duty had fallen to its lowest figure, and that the bonded corn could be released at the rate of one shilling a quarter, the sudden withdrawal of vast quantities from the warehouses, and the consequent flooding of the consumption markets, resulted in the most disadvan-

tageous manner, causing violent fluctuations of price, and of course reacting upon the sliding-scale by affecting the wheat averages on artificial grounds.

There was a further unsteadiness due to the fact that most of this competition and speculation took place in a few posts of entry. The radius of supply was limited, and the factors who had to purchase for inland markets were obliged to carry on a sharp competition amongst themselves.

This want of steadiness, moreover, in the corn trade of England with foreign countries interfered with the ordinary operation of international commerce, and prevented the practical exchange of English manufactured goods for foreign corn. The payments for corn were made in gold; and thus—it was commonly argued—the currency was seriously affected.

The natural remedy for these evils, it was contended by some, was the adoption of a fixed duty in place of the sliding-scale, so that at least the disadvantages of the existing system would be reduced to their lowest terms. The markets of the world would be virtually open to English purchasers of foreign corn; there would no longer be a bonus on withholding grain within reach of the consumers; prices would not be artificially forced up; and even a fixed duty of several shillings might be collected with less injury and cost to the consumer than a duty of one shilling could be under existing circumstances.

Of course there were other remedies suggested—and notably that of a complete abolition of duties. And there were other arguments, more or less forcible and sound. But at the beginning of the decade in which Sir Robert Peel adopted free trade principles, the sliding-scale itself was condemned by thoughtful men of every shade of political opinion.

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## CHAPTER III.

### ARGUMENTS FOR PROTECTION.

THE sliding-scale of duties on imported corn was of course not the only protective tariff by which the commercial legislation of former days attempted to benefit Englishmen by excluding competition from their own markets. It was the most characteristic of all the tariffs, and its direct effect upon the food of the people made it the most obnoxious and oppressive ; but there were many other provisions of a similar kind, which had been imposed either in a vain hope of increasing the revenue or for the express purpose of encouraging particular home industries. Very many articles of production and exchange were thus prevented from coming into the country, or their introduction was discouraged by duties which rendered it almost impossible that the manufacturers and merchants of other lands should bring them to us on terms profitable to themselves. But the principles which applied to the duties on corn applied also to other miscellaneous duties, and it was inevitable that the agitation for free trade in corn should embrace or be attended by an agitation for free trade in every kind of commodity which is capable of being made, a subject of international commerce.

And conversely, every argument which tended, or was intended, to show the advantage of protecting our home producers of corn could be employed to prove that our manufacturers and merchants were entitled to protection against foreigners.

The struggle, then, which in its earlier stages was conducted exclusively against the monopoly in grain, and which was regarded as a battle for cheap food, became in its later phases a question of general free trade. The Anti-Corn Law League was virtually an Anti-Monopoly League; and it was only natural that the first positive result of the agitation was the abandonment of the duties on manufactured articles.

Now there were not wanting men in an eminent position—statesmen and political economists, orators and journalists—who, even as a matter of theory, argued that it was wise and necessary to maintain these restrictions. There were more (and indeed, as we have already said, a majority of the ruling classes in the first decade of the century) who considered the restrictions necessary in practice, even if they admitted the theoretical truth of the free trade doctrines. This was the ground taken by successive Governments in replying to the representations made by the Free Traders in and out of Parliament, from the debates of 1815 down to the complete surrender of Sir Robert Peel. The contention was natural, it was intelligible, and it was looked upon as above all things patriotic. To disregard the interests of other nations in comparison with our own, to give to English merchants and agriculturists a preference in English markets (even above what they possessed in the nature of things) over their rivals from France, or Germany, or Russia; to foster our home industries by taking it out of the power of consumers to buy the produce of foreign competitors, and thus to force them to buy home produce at a high price; to exclude the commodities of outsiders so

long as our own warehouses and granaries were full, and to admit them only when the contents of these had been sold out at a profitable rate—such were the aims and boasts of our leading economists, and not merely of those who proclaimed themselves Conservative, or were landowners or grain-producers on a great scale, but even of men as open to conviction as Huskisson and Gladstone.

It was not until the Anti-Corn Law League had begun to make itself a power, and to disseminate the principles of free trade broadcast through the kingdom, gaining many converts in every rank of society, that the champions of protection had a special inducement to formulate their ideas. So long as these ideas were called in question mainly by the unrefined mob, and by orators like Hunt, Bamford, and a few doctrinaires, there was comparatively little controversy outside the walls of Parliament. But when the question had been made urgent and pressing, and especially when a Conservative Government showed signs of yielding to the general demand of the country, the protectionists began to make all that it was possible to make of their cause. The speeches of the abolitionists and the publications of the League were met by speeches and pamphlets on the other side.

Perhaps the most succinct and closely-reasoned defence of protection was contained in a protest entered in the House of Lords against the passing of the measure of 1846. This protest, the substance of which is appended, is supposed to have been written by the late Lord Derby, who at that time sat in the Upper House as Lord Stanley, by special summons. It was signed by eighty-nine peers, who assigned the following reasons for their dissent:—\*

“1. Because the repeal of the Corn Laws will greatly increase the dependence of this country upon foreign countries for its supply of food,

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\* See *Cobden and Political Opinion*, by Mr. Thorold Rogers, p. 36.

and will thereby expose it to dangers against which former statesmen have thought it essential to take legislative precautions.

"2. Because there is no security nor probability that other nations will take similar steps; and this country will therefore not only be exposed to the risks of failure of supply consequent on a state of war, but will also be exclusively subject to an unlimited influx of corn in times of abundance, and to sudden checks whenever short crops shall reduce the ordinary supply from the exporting countries, or their Governments shall deem it necessary to take precautionary measures for their own protection, thus causing rapid and disastrous fluctuations in the markets of this country.

"3. Because under a system of protection the agriculture of this country has more than kept pace with the increasing demand of its increasing population, and because it is to be apprehended that the removal of protection may throw some lands out of cultivation, and check in others the progress of improvement which has led to this satisfactory result.

"4. Because it is unjust to withdraw protection from the landed interest of this country, while that interest remains subject to exclusive burdens imposed for purposes of general and not of special advantage.

"5. Because the loss to be sustained by the repeal of the Corn Laws will fall most heavily upon the least wealthy portion of the landed proprietors, will press immediately and severely on the tenant-farmers, and through them, with ruinous consequences, on the agricultural labourers.

"6. Because indirectly, but not less certainly, injuries will result to the manufacturing interest, and especially to the artizans and mechanics, from competition with the agricultural labourers thrown out of employment, but principally from the loss of the home market, caused by the inability of the producers of grain, and those dependent upon them, to consume manufactured goods to the same extent as heretofore.

"7. Because the same cause will produce similar evil results to the tradesmen, retail dealers, and others in country towns, not themselves engaged in agricultural pursuits, but mainly dependent for their subsistence on their dealings with those who are so engaged.

"8. Because the effect of a repeal of the Corn Laws will be especially injurious to Ireland, by lowering the value of the principal exports, and by still further reducing the demand for labour, the want of which is among the principal evils of her social condition.

"9. Because a free trade in corn will cause a large and unnecessary diminution of annual income, thus impairing the revenue of the country,

and at the same time that it cripples the resources of those classes on whom the weight of local taxation now mainly falls.

"10. Because a general reduction of prices, consequent on a reduction in the price of corn, will tend unduly to raise the monied interest at the expense of all others, and to aggravate the pressure of the national burdens.

"11. Because the removal of differential duties in favour of Canadian corn is at variance with the legislative encouragement held out to that colony by Parliament, on the faith of which the colonists have laid out large sums on the improvement of their internal navigation; and because the removal of protection will direct the traffic of the interior from St. Lawrence and the British ports of Montreal and Quebec to the foreign port of New York, thus throwing out of employment a large amount of British shipping, severing the commercial interests of Canada from those of the parent country, and connecting those interests most intimately with the United States of America.

"12. Because the adoption of a similar system with regard to other articles of commerce will tend to sever the strongest bond of union between this country and her colonies, will deprive the British merchant of that which is now his most certain market, and sap the foundation of that colonial system, to which, commercially and politically, this country owes much of its present greatness."

The stress of the argument in these twelve contentions is laid upon the question of duties on corn, which was natural enough, both because the protest was entered against a Corn Importation Act and because the protesters were all virtually corn-producers. But some of the reasons apply equally well to every other market commodity subject to foreign competition.

The dangers referred to in the first reason are perhaps chiefly those which would arise from the occurrence of war between ourselves and a nation which had largely supplied our markets. Certainly the Napoleonic wars had given us a memorable instance of commercial exclusion, and it was natural to argue that we should suffer more from such a state of things if we had made ourselves dependent on foreign supplies. But it might be answered to this that we were already practically dependent on foreign supplies, that

we had to resort to foreign corn whenever our own harvests were insufficient, that this necessity was sure to increase with an increasing population, that in these cases we had to pay a monstrous price for our imports, and that by adopting a plan which would give us a regular supply at low prices we should certainly not be in greater peril of a sudden scarcity than under the old system. Events, of course, have proved that the danger in time of war is not a formidable one, and that, under the regulating influence of free trade, no cause makes a very serious difference in the price of corn. A recurrence of the state of things which existed on the Continent at the beginning of the century is not sufficiently probable to be taken into serious consideration by economical legislators; and, even if a new Napoleon were to arise, the attempt to place England under a commercial blockade would be less likely to be repeated, and less effectual if made, after the adoption of free trade than before it. Moreover, England, with her navy and her maritime fleet, her colonies in every quarter of the globe, and her close relations with so many trading countries, is more independent of partial exclusions and enmities than any other nation.

The presumption contained in the second reason was not borne out. It is true that some countries have for a time, and under special circumstances, returned to the system of protection. And it is true that the evil consequence apprehended by the protest has been partially experienced by us—not, however, in the corn trade so much as in respect of the iron and other industries. But one of the contentions of free trade is that the nations adopting it profit by the prosperity of the population as a whole, though individuals may occasionally suffer, and on a general average of the markets, though an industry here and there may be occasionally embarrassed. It is impossible to obtain “security” that all other nations will cling to free trade



at the same time, or without intermission ; but, on the other hand, there is no danger of our being “exclusively subject to an unlimited influx” of any commodity.

The third and fourth reasons are unsound. They argue from the special interests of a class, as against the general interest of the nation ; and they beg the question by saying that the law ought to remain as it was, simply because it had conferred exclusive advantages and privileges upon the landed interest. To the fifth reason it might have been sufficient to reply that the farmers and the agricultural labourers could not possibly fare worse than they had done under the system of protection, by which the landowners and the speculators were the only gainers.

The sixth reason was a curious plea against a change which had been brought about by the earnest and determined efforts of the manufacturers and the inhabitants of the great towns. These men had been quite willing that the experiment should be tried first in connection with their own immediate interests, and in the markets from which they derived their own incomes ; and it was not to be supposed that, after they had demanded and assented to the abolition of tariffs on manufactured goods, they would feel any alarm as to the competition of agricultural labourers, or the diminished purchasing power of grain-growers and their dependents.

There was in this reason an appeal or an allusion to the undoubted dislike of free trade by a section of “the artizans and mechanics,” and especially by the Chartist leaders. It is not difficult to understand why such an antagonism should exist. The Anti-Corn Law agitation was, as we have seen, and as we shall presently have further occasion to see, the special work of the manufacturers ; and Chartism opposed itself with greatest bitterness to the owners of mills and factories. The men who destroyed machinery, burned down the hives of labour, and proclaimed war against the large

employers, were not in a mood to look favourable upon an association of Lancashire cotton merchants. Nor were Mr. Cobden and his friends inclined to accept the alliance of the Chartists on equal terms, even if it had been offered to them; for the methods of the Chartists (or of some of their most prominent leaders) were professedly violent, whereas the Manchester school very steadily and successfully repudiated every weapon except that of logical argument. The Chartists were therefore predisposed to think that free trade would limit the employment of workmen, and would bring crowds of agricultural labourers to compete against them in the workshops and mines.

The seventh reason makes a somewhat similar appeal to the interests of the small provincial traders, who of course regarded themselves as dependent on the landowners and the agricultural classes, and who were alarmed to think that their patrons were on the high road to ruin. There were many amongst them who could rise superior to such considerations, and who could accept the principle of free trade with confidence; but as a rule they united with the landlords, clergy, and farmers in their cry against the innovation.

The eighth reason points to a result which did, as a matter of fact, ensue from the removal of protection. Here again we have a sectional and temporary disadvantage to set against the general profit of the nation. But the true cause of Irish distress must be looked for elsewhere. It existed under protection, when the landowners were at the height of their prosperity; and it exists still, when the agricultural interest has had time to recover from the shock of 1846.

The ninth reason has been entirely disproved by experience. The "diminution of annual income," and the "impairing the revenue of the country," are ludicrous inapplicable terms, in the light of our national records for the past thirty years.

The tenth reason will have greater force in the mind of some than it will have in the mind of others. But we could not afford to reject the advantages arising from a liberal commercial legislation even for the luxury of crippling and humiliating the "monied interest."

The last two reasons will also have a different weight with different people. No doubt our adoption of free trade rendered it necessary that we should make our greater colonies more self-dependent, whilst it sacrificed much of the profit which we might otherwise have gained from some of the smaller ones. Coupled with the abolition of slavery, it prevented us from drawing the revenue which our newer possessions, such as the West Indies, had been expected to yield. But the very remarkable progress which has been made by Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the Cape Colony since the date of this protest of the Lords, deprives these contentions of their chief significance, and will appear to most Englishmen as an argument in favour of, rather than against, free trade. The colonies just named are now practically independent countries. They have grown and prospered until they can stand without any fostering restrictions from the mother country. Time will bring to them the solution of their doubts; but so far as we have gone, free trade has not produced any breach in our colonial system such as that which resulted from the financial policy of a hundred years ago.

These opinions, these pleas for protection, which were maintained in 1846 by a minority in the House of Lords itself, had been something more than Tory fallacies a few years before. They were, in the main, the official views on commercial policy and international trade, which no Minister in power had gravely contested up to the time when Sir Robert Peel, Mr. Gladstone, and a few of their colleagues had been won over by the unanswerable arguments of Mr. Cobden and his associates.



## CHAPTER IV.

### FREE TRADE PRINCIPLES.

THE principles of Free Trade naturally began to be expounded and systematically enforced as soon as the advocates of the restrictive systems had taken to dogmatising. A little more than a hundred years ago, Adam Smith published his work on *The Wealth of Nations*, and, in a chapter dealing with the systems of Political Economy which represent the products of land as the sole principal source of national wealth, he enunciates certain ideas which have often been regarded as the basis of systematised Free Trade doctrine in England. His work, successful in the first instance, was comparatively neglected for some years, during the height of the revolutionary crisis ; but in the first decade of the present century it was republished, and went through several editions, and his authority has been freely recognised by all writers and speakers on economical questions.

Adam Smith is led to examine the "Agricultural system," as he calls it, and to discuss the freedom in trade, by commenting on the views of Quesnai, a French predecessor in the same field. Quesnai had constructed an "Economical Table," in which he had set down what he considered the

normal and natural distribution of the produce of land amongst proprietors, cultivators, and unproductive consumers. This "Economical Table" showed the nature of the distribution in a state of complete liberty and of the highest prosperity, "in a state where the annual produce is such as to afford the greatest possible nett produce, and where each class enjoys its proper share of the whole annual produce." In other tables he showed how the distribution would be made in different states of restraint and regulation, "in which either the class of proprietors, or the barren and unproductive class, is more favoured than the class of cultivators, and in which either the one or the other encroaches more or less upon the share which ought properly to belong to this productive class. Every such encroachment, every violation of that natural distribution which the most perfect liberty would establish, must, according to this system, necessarily degrade more or less, from one year to another, the value and sum total of the annual produce, and must necessarily occasion a declension in the real wealth and revenue of the society."

This was the view of Quesnai, whom Adam Smith calls a "very ingenious and profound" writer. The English economist quarrels with the Frenchman for representing that agricultural products are the principal or only source of increased wealth, "representing the class of artificers, manufacturers, and merchants, as altogether barren and unproductive;" and in this the critic was doubtless right. But he did not entirely follow his leader in the contention that the political body would only thrive under a precise regimen—"the exact regimen of perfect liberty and perfect justice." On this point Adam Smith says, that "the natural effort which every man is continually making to better his own condition is a principle of preservation capable of preventing and correcting, in many respects, the bad effects of a political economy in some degree both partial and oppres-

sive. Such a political economy, though it no doubt retards more or less, is not always capable of stopping altogether the natural progress of a nation towards wealth and prosperity, and still less of making it go backwards. If a nation could not prosper without the enjoyment of perfect liberty and perfect justice, there is not in the world a nation which could ever have prospered."

It is evident that the English writer constrained himself to take the most moderate view of the restrictive regulations which he found in force; but the spirit which pervades his work as a whole shows him to have been thoroughly convinced of the necessity of free commerce for national prosperity. As Dugald Stuart points out in his well-known essay on Adam Smith's work, the great and leading object of his speculations is "to illustrate the provision made by nature in the principles of the human mind, for a gradual and progressive augmentation in the means of national wealth, and to demonstrate that the most effectual plan for advancing a people to greatness is to maintain that order of which nature has pointed out; by allowing every man, as long as he observes the rules of justice, to pursue his own interest in his own way, and to bring both his industry and his capital into the freest competition with those of his fellow-citizens. Every system of policy which endeavours, either by extraordinary encouragements to draw towards a particular species of industry a greater share of the capital of the society than what would naturally go to it, or, by extraordinary restraints, to force from a particular species of industry some share of the capital which would otherwise be employed in it, is, in reality, subversive of the great purpose which it means to promote."

Here we have the true and fundamental principle of free trade, that is to say, free and unrestricted competition—the natural development of industry and enterprise, without interference and without limitation. Here was the germ of

general theory whereof his comments on Quesnai's ideas were merely an application. As we have said, Adam Smith rather indicates and prepares the way for free trade doctrines than expounds and systematizes them ; but the effect of his book upon the reader's mind is to produce a conviction of its justice, and of the absolute truth of its most characteristic theories. The author speaks with something like bitterness of the selfish monopolies and restrictions which were created by tariffs, bounties, and the like, in order to secure what was called the balance of trade. "Commerce," he says in one place, "which ought naturally to be among nations, as among individuals, a bond of union and friendship, has become the most fertile source of discord and animosity. The capricious ambition of kings and ministers has not, during the present and the preceding century, been more fatal to the repose of Europe than the impertinent jealousy of merchants and manufacturers. The violence and injustice of the rulers of mankind is an ancient evil for which perhaps the nature of human affairs can scarce admit of a remedy. But the mean rapacity, the monopolising spirit of merchants and manufacturers, who neither are nor ought to be the rulers of mankind, though it cannot perhaps be corrected, may very easily be prevented from disturbing the tranquillity of anybody but themselves."

The landowning monopolists were somewhat more tenderly dealt with ; but, so far as logical argument and proof were concerned, the aim of Adam Smith was fully accomplished by his book. He was, moreover, not only a writer, but a lecturer and an eager controversialist ; his ideas impressed themselves at once on the minds of hearers as well as of readers, so that, as Dugald Stuart says, though he survived the publication of his principal work only fifteen years, he had the satisfaction of seeing the opposition which it at first excited gradually subside, and to witness the practical influence of his teaching on the commercial policy of his

country. The growth of this influence was, no doubt, seriously checked by the intervention of an epoch of war and distress; but he had sown the seeds of truth in the minds of his fellow-countrymen, and he was destined to find in Cobden and the Manchester School the practical expositors of his ideas.

In fact, Adam Smith may be said to have founded a school of political economists, whereof Cobden and his friends, fifty or sixty years later, were a section. His personal and immediate influence seems almost to have been exaggerated by some of his admirers, great as it undoubtedly was. Thus Sir James Mackintosh speaks of the *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* as "perhaps the only book which produced an immediate, general, and irrevocable change in some of the most important parts of the legislation of all civilised nations." "In a few years it began to alter laws and treaties, and has made its way through the convulsions of revolution and conquest to a due ascendant over the minds of men with far less than the average of those obstructions of prejudice and clamour which ordinarily choke the channel through which truth flows into practice."

If this is somewhat too much to say for Adam Smith's work, the default is due to the highly unfavourable character of the times immediately succeeding the publication of his work more than to any lack of cogency in his arguments; and though his success was scarcely so great, in a practical sense, as Sir James Mackintosh suggests, it was logically complete. As a writer, Adam Smith is pre-eminently convincing, no less by his candour and moderation than by his exactness and clearness. His treatment of Navigation Laws is an excellent instance of the method which he adopted. He states the case of the advocates of the shipping monopoly with so much fulness that some of his critics have been misled into thinking that he defended it. He admits that



the Navigation Act of his day, by encouraging English trade with the colonies, and laying burdens upon the shippers of other nations, had forced into this particular trade "a greater amount of the capital of Great Britain than would otherwise have gone into it," and that certain advantages had accrued from it in certain special quarters. He even goes so far as to say that the Act had "very properly endeavoured to give the sailors and shipping of Great Britain the monopoly of the trade of their own country." But he puts this forth only as a seemingly advantageous arrangement; and in another part of his book he takes occasion to point out that "the monopoly of the colony trade, so far as it has operated upon the employment of the capital of Great Britain, has in all cases forced some part of it from a foreign trade of consumption carried on with a neighbouring, to one carried on with a more distant country, and in many cases from a direct foreign trade of consumption to a roundabout one." Again: "The monopoly of the colony trade has forced some part of the capital of Great Britain from all foreign trade of consumption to a carrying trade; and, consequently, from supporting more or less the industry of Great Britain to be employed altogether in supporting, partly that of the colonies, and partly that of some other countries." And again: "The monopoly of the colony trade, by forcing towards it a much greater proportion of the capital of Great Britain than what would naturally have gone to it, seems to have broken altogether that natural balance which would otherwise have taken place among all the other branches of British industry. The industry of Great Britain, instead of being accommodated to a great number of small markets, has been principally suited to one great market. Her commerce, instead of running in a great number of small channels, has been taught to run principally in one great channel. But the whole system of her industry and commerce has thereby been rendered less

secure, the whole state of her body politic less healthful than it otherwise would have been."

This is the general drift of Adam Smith's argument. He is constantly insisting on the necessity of giving free play to the natural course of trade, as in a physical body it is necessary to keep the circulation of the blood in the veins without restriction, lest a sudden arrest in the flow of an artificially swollen stream should "bring on the most dangerous disorder upon the whole body politic." This is the essence of his teaching, that free trade allows a natural development, tending to a natural prosperity, whereas every check upon the development of natural resources is a loss and a danger.

Yet, though he was so clear in his own mind, and though he brought such deep conviction to the minds of others, he was by no means confident of the practical success of his theory. "To expect that the freedom of trade should ever be entirely restored in Great Britain," he says in one place, "is as absurd as to expect that an Oceana or Utopia should ever be established in it." An apostle should not throw cold water on the ardour of his disciples. No man in the present day would enunciate a creed which he felt to be true, and at the same time protest that to believe in its triumph would be absurd. But perhaps the unqualified triumph of free trade principles in England, in face of the immense difficulties which Adam Smith foresaw, has done as much as anything else to give the philosophers and prophets of to-day their sanguine confidence in the future.



## CHAPTER V.

### THE POLITICAL ARENA.

**W**E have already glanced at the condition of affairs in England after the conclusion of peace in 1815.

“Peterloo” came four years after Waterloo, but the general distress and discontent which had found expression at Manchester in 1819 were to continue for a whole generation without finding a remedy. Boys had become middle-aged men, and middle-aged men had turned gray, whilst England was steeped in the most bitter misfortune, and whilst Englishmen were starving. It needed such a terrible experience to wring just measures of reform out of the ruling classes, and to make men of wealth and position realise the desperate plight of the great majority of the people.

The first demand to which the legislature yielded was that of Parliamentary Reform. Cobbett had a true instinct when he told the people that they could never gain what they needed until they were better represented. The leaders of the agitation for Reform used the same language. Some went so far as to argue for universal suffrage and the abolition of the hereditary Chamber, but all agreed that a wide extension of the suffrage was necessary before the

popular grievances could be remedied. Of course the distress of the country was always appealed to as the strongest proof that could be required of the badness of the existing form of government, and of the necessity for its modification. It is noteworthy that even in the third decade of the century, before the cry for commercial reform had been generally raised, Manchester played a leading part in the struggle.

Mr. Greville, in his interesting diary,\* writing in the first month of 1831, reveals to us the feeling of anxiety and trepidation with which many men in the upper ranks of society then regarded the growing popular discontent. "Met Colonel Napier last night," he writes on January 25th, "and talked for an hour of the state of the country. He gave me a curious account of the organisation of the manufacturers in and about Manchester, who are divided into four different classes, with different objects, partly political, generally to better themselves, but with a regular government, the seat of which is in the Isle of Man. He says that the agriculturists are likewise organised in Wiltshire, and that there is a sort of freemasonry among them; he thinks a revolution inevitable; and when I told him what Southey had said—that if he had money enough he would transport himself and his family to America—he said he would not himself leave England in times of danger, but that he should like to remove his family if he could.

. . . What a state of terror and confusion we are in, though it seems to make no difference!"

The same writer, in the same page of his diary, refers to a report that the king, who had then recently ascended the throne, was ill; and he adds that if he were to die, "and the little girl," there would only be the Duke of Cumberland left to inherit the crown. "That," he says, "would be

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\* *The Greville Memoirs.* Vol. II., p. 108.

a good moment for dispensing with the regal office." Such a remark from such a writer is a curious illustration of the feeling of Englishmen in those times, even in regard to the monarchy. Sentiments of this kind, in men of Mr. Greville's position, could not have been generated except under the most grave and extraordinary conditions; but there is quite enough in the circumstances of the time to account for them. There was, indeed, at this moment an actual revolution in England, which was the direct result of long-continued misery. The Duke of Wellington's short Administration ended amidst disorders, outbreaks, riots, suppressions of a violent character, of almost daily occurrence. The close of the year 1830 was marked by specially alarming events. "London," says Mr. Greville, "is like the capital of a country desolated by cruel war or foreign invasion, and we are always looking for reports of battles, burnings, and other disorders." "Reform, economy, echoed backwards and forwards, the doubts, the hopes, and the fears of those who have anything to lose, the uncertainty of everybody's future condition, the immense interests at stake, the magnitude and imminence of the danger, all contribute to produce a nervous excitement which extends to all classes—to almost every individual."

The popular excitement was in a large measure calmed down by the passing of the Reform Act of 1832; but there still remained the "economy" which Mr. Greville mentions as the other subject of general complaint. As time went on, and it was found that the reform of Parliament was not producing the great results which had been expected from it; as the sufferings of the people continued unabated, and Lord Grey's Government had done little more for the country than the Duke of Wellington's, the discontent speedily revived. The great Liberal majority was divided by fissures as wide as those between the Whigs and Tories, and whilst some members of the party of progress (like

Lord John Russell) began to demand a further development in the representation of the people, the Radicals took up the question of economical reform. This became henceforth more and more the question of the day. Trade still languished, the manufacturers were still crippled, the artisans and labourers starved; food was at starvation prices, the masses of the nation were pauperized. Throughout the reign of William the Fourth, there was little or no improvement of a permanent character. In the earlier years of Victoria's reign matters rapidly grew worse, and thus when the century entered on its fifth decade the distress of the country rose to as high a pitch as it had ever yet reached.

This was the moment when Sir Robert Peel assumed office with the famous Administration which was to sweep away the worst of all monopolies. Cobden and the Anti-Corn Law League had been prominently before the public for some years; but we shall have less occasion hereafter to break the thread of our narrative if we now so far anticipate as to glance at the state of parties in 1841, and consider the political circumstances in which Peel undertook the task of government.

As already said, the Government of 1832 had satisfied no one. The results were scarcely commensurate with the efforts made to place it in power, and after the Reform Act, which had been discounted by anticipation, there was little or nothing in the measures of Lord Grey and his colleagues about which the friends of progress could grow enthusiastic. The difficulties of the party began forthwith, and there was not much strength or cohesion amongst the Liberals for a long time to come. The Whigs of course triumphed over the Radicals, and the mild supremacy of Lord Melbourne kept a Ministry together with much difficulty and to practically little purpose. Meanwhile the Conservatives patiently awaited the moment when they would be recalled to power, their chief difficulty being as to who should form a Cabinet

when the time arrived. The only serious claimants for the Premiership were Peel and the Duke of Wellington, and between them the rivalry was at one time severe. The Duke, however, failed in his attempt in 1834, and the memory of his Administration in 1830 was not such as to encourage his adherents, or to breathe hope into the minds of those who were dazzled by his personal prestige. It was manifest that Peel was the most promising candidate of the two, although he was the least popular amongst the old Tory chiefs.

Sir Robert Peel was one of a succession of prominent English statesmen who, in different epochs of the present century, have held up the flag of Conservatism, whilst practically sympathising more with popular progress than with the cautious premediation which belong to the traditions of the Conservative party. Canning had been such a man, and so had Huskisson, who was one of the earliest official Free Traders. Mr. Gladstone was such a man, though he has advanced far beyond the line where his models would have arrested themselves. These are the politicians who have exemplified in some degree the sarcastic definition of Conservatism which Lord Beaconsfield puts in the mouth of one of his characters—Tory Men and Whig Measures. Peel was the *beau idéal* of the class, for he combined the two main characteristics of political life—circumspection and action—whilst he was personally in his prime, and able to look forward to a long and honourable career. It was well known that he had certain leanings of a more Liberal character than the majority of his friends approved, and yet this fact did not prevent him from making good his claims as the leader of the territorialists. When he assumed office in 1841 it was distinctly as the representative of the country party; not that he was pledged (as it was erroneously stated) specifically to resist all attempts to modify the principle of protection, but because he had

become the natural chief of the party, and because it was expected of him that he would maintain the interests of the landlords and the agriculturists with fidelity and success.

But Peel was a statesman before he was a politician; and the distinction was due in the main to the fact that he was open to conviction on the greatest domestic question of the day. It would indeed have been strange if a man of his candour and perception had been impervious to conviction in such a matter, and in such extraordinary circumstances. The first year of his Premiership was the turning-point of the agitation in the country, for it was the crisis of the country's sufferings, when the hard lessons of national adversity came to the assistance of theory and deduction.

It was, in fact, impossible that any statesman of that day should be ignorant of—should not be profoundly impressed by—the state of the people and of popular opinion. Nothing was wanting to inform or to stimulate the minds of men. Already, as we have seen, there was the Anti-Corn Law League, there were the Chartists in full activity, there were ruined manufacturers and wholesale strikes, there were crammed poorhouses and unreachd starvation, there were desperate riots and undetected crime, there was the earnest declamation of the Parliamentary Radicals, and the candid admission of the leaders of the two great political parties. On every side there was abundant evidence of evils which must be remedied if the rulers of England were to retain the name of statesmen, and if England itself were to avoid a revolution. When the Queen came to the throne, five years had passed since the Reform Bill, and nothing had come from it, so far as the wretchedness of the people was concerned. Now five years more had passed, and nothing had come from the change. The Chartists had begun the new reign by addressing a petition to the Queen, setting forth the grievances of the working classes, and virtually appealing to her from the



incompetency of her Ministers. This petition, drawn up by William Lovett, one of the Chartist leaders, was presented by Lord John Russell (since Lovett and his friends were not prepared with the indispensable swords and wigs); but the petitioners received no answer, except the formal assurance that Her Majesty had been acquainted with their prayer. The young monarch, however, gave sufficient evidence of sympathy with her people, and was at any rate more disposed to relieve them than the last George and the last William had been. It was not in the power of the Crown to remedy the evils from which England was suffering; and Lord Melbourne's Ministry went too cautiously about the task to satisfy the popular impatience.

The agitations which characterised the first few years of this reign, and which derived their force from a common origin, were quite distinct in their aims and methods. The Chartists were intolerant and apparently jealous of every movement except their own;\* and it is important to bear in mind the complete isolation of Mr. Cobden's struggle in its earlier stages. Feargus O'Connor, and the men who acted with him, consistently maintained that their own cure was the only one that could be applied with success, and condemned the efforts of the Anti-Corn Law League as useless, and even pernicious. They told their followers that nothing short of universal suffrage would do them any good, that the question of the Corn Laws, and of free trade, was comparatively insignificant, that their sole hope consisted in the resolute, and, if necessary, the forcible extortion of the Charter from the ruling classes. Their animosity against the League went so far as to make them turn aside in their own campaign to fight against the men

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\* The six points of the Charter were universal suffrage, vote by ballot, annual Parliaments, equal electoral districts, abolition of the property qualification for members of Parliament, and the payment of members.

who were really fighting the battle of the people, and who, as it eventually appeared, were on the right and the straight path towards the goal. The Peel Administration were not greatly moved by the violence of the Chartists, by strikes and riots, by the month's abstinence from labour, by the declamations of O'Connor, Oastler, and the men of August ; but they were impressed and converted by Cobden and his peaceful assault of argument.





## CHAPTER VI.

### THE PIONEERS.

WE have considered both the soil in which the new economical doctrines were to be sown and cultivated, and the germ from which the harvest was to be raised. It is time that we should make acquaintance with the men whose labour tilled the ground, scattered the seed, and gathered in the crop.

Before Cobden was in a position to advocate his views, and even whilst he was still a boy, there had been active champions of free trade principles in England. One of the earliest, if not one of the strongest of these, was William Cobbett, whose trenchant pen was employed in defence of popular rights from the very beginning of the great revolutionary epoch. He began by declaiming against what he was pleased to call the cant and hypocrisy of Tom Paine; he published a paper at Philadelphia which gained him a welcome in England, in the first year of the century, as a Tory; he denounced the peace of Amiens, and started another paper in this country which was believed to have been supported by Tory gold. There is, however, no proof of this, and soon after the *Porcupine Gazette* had failed, and the *Weekly Register* had been set on foot, Cobbett developed a thoroughly democratic temper, and easily transgressed

the narrow limits which then restricted freedom of speech. In 1804 and 1810 he was convicted of libel, and on the latter occasion he was fined a thousand pounds and sentenced to two years' imprisonment. In 1816 his *Twopenny Trash* brought him into evil odour with the authorities, and, fearing the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act, he fled to America in the following year. Though his influence was in some degree impaired by this, he returned to do yeoman's service in the popular cause. Thus we find him, immediately after the Reform Act, urging Englishmen to renewed efforts, complaining that the Act had done nothing for them, and pointing to economical reform as the special necessity of the time.

In the *Weekly Political Register* for June 1st, 1833, Cobbett quoted some statistics from the *Examiner* relating to the import duties on food, to which, under the title of "Partial Taxation," he prefaced a characteristic introduction. "This matter," he wrote, "has attracted the eyes of the people at last. I started the game long ago, and had all the sport to myself for a good while; but now all have joined in the chase. Spring Rice . . . would do better to answer this than to boast of the 'high honour and generous conduct' of those who have imposed these taxes; and Peel's Bill Peel would be as well employed in the same work as in calling on 'the gentlemen of England' to unite to resist the member for Oldham. It is these taxes, thus partially imposed, that give me that power which an inborn quality in Peel's Bill Peel makes him so much overrate. Repeal these taxes, or make them impartial, and my power, whatever it may be, is gone. This is what the 'gentlemen of England' ought to unite in: their uniting in coughing, and groaning, and howling, and braying against me is of no more use than would be such efforts if made use of to still the winds or the waves. Nay, this is just so much done to weaken their own power, and to add force and effect to

mine. Do justice to the people. That is the way to 'expunge' my 'speculations on confusion;' and there is no other way. Before the reader enters on the examination of the following tables, let him call to mind that, belong to which faction the wrong may, they have it between them. . . . It is their own work, and let them enjoy the fruits of it."

Cobbett wrote much in the first person, and his eloquence very frequently took himself and his actions for its theme. But he is justified in his boast that he had frequently protested against the food-monopolies, and against the unequal effect of the tariffs on rich and poor.

The statement in the *Examiner*, which Cobbett commends to his own readers, deals with some of the principal articles subject to Excise and Customs duties, and calculates in each case the amount of duty payable on the lower, middle, and higher qualities of the various commodities, drawing the conclusion that the higher-priced goods were taxed at lower rates in a spirit of favouritism to the rich. Thus, the commonest paper was charged with a duty of 200 per cent. of the value, the middle kind at 100, and the best kind at 25 per cent. The rates on sugar were respectively 105, 66, and 30; on tobacco, 1400, 600, and 150; and similarly with many other articles. The writer speaks of "what are ridiculously called discriminating and protecting duties," which he describes as "neither more nor less than iniquitous taxes imposed on the people of this country in order to put money into the pockets of some one bloated and overgrown interest or another—landholders, slaveholders, or ship-owners." After giving thirty or forty examples of discriminating duties, he continues:—"We might add to this a long list of foreign articles taxed, not for revenue, but to confer a monopoly upon the corresponding productions of the English soil, to raise rents, or, in other words, to take money out of the pockets of the people for the purpose of putting money into the pockets of the landed aristocracy."

On ten or a dozen agricultural products the taxes amounted to three millions sterling ; " but this is very far from being all. The duties on such articles as perry, cider, and bacon, are prohibitory. That on such a necessary of life, for example, as bacon is 28s. per cwt., which is equal to an *ad valorem* duty of sixty to seventy per cent. In all this we make no reference to the effect of the Corn Laws, which by good judges are estimated to enhance the price of bread in this country by a sum equal to £18,000,000 a-year, and to amount to a tax on the non-agricultural classes of society of £12,000,000."

By this time free trade had become a Parliamentary question. As we have seen, Huskisson and even Canning had virtually confessed their belief in the superiority of freedom in commerce over prohibitory duties. Speaking of the silk trade in 1824, Mr. Huskisson, then President of the Board of Trade, declared that the duties had left Englishmen far behind their neighbours in that branch of industry. " We have witnessed that chilling and benumbing effect which is always sure to be felt when no genius is called into action, and when we are rendered indifferent to exertion by the indolent security of a prohibitory system." This was a remark of very general application, and there were many who made a point of applying it to every other protected trade. It was, in fact, the repeal of the law prohibiting silk manufactures which, as Huskisson foresaw, really protected our own silk industry from extinction.

Joseph Hume was in the House of Commons at this time. He had eagerly supported Huskisson in 1824, and he seldom or never let a session pass without arguing the case of free trade. In 1826 he moved a resolution directly condemning the Corn Laws, though without obtaining much assistance on his own side of the House. In 1834 he raised a debate on the same issue, which lasted over two nights, and gave it as his opinion that the repeal of the existing laws, prohibiting imports under certain conditions, would

have the effect of doubling or trebling our home manufactures. He contended not only against prohibition, but against protection of any kind; but he was left in a very small minority in the Reformed Parliament. Nevertheless, the paradoxes which were now set down as mischievous or impracticable were soon to be the accepted principles of the Government.

The Hon. (since then Right Hon.) C. P. Villiers, brother to the Earl of Clarendon, took up the question in the House of Commons. From the first year of the present reign he made annual motions for inquiry into the operation of the Corn Laws, or moved resolutions against them; and his minorities were at least respectable, including most of the independent talent in the House. In 1838 he made one of his best and most forcible speeches on the subject, vigorously describing the evil effects of protection on all classes of the community, and appealing to the landlords on grounds of reason and justice, as well as of self-interest. "Do they," he asked, "see no signs in the present times that should make them pause before they determine to maintain a system opposed by the industry, the intelligence, the commerce, and the masses of this country, and which they cannot possibly, beyond a limited time, expect to retain?"

But Mr. Villiers pleaded in vain. He made no impression on Lord Melbourne, or his principal colleagues in the Cabinet, though he had the votes of Sir John Cam Hobhouse and Lord Morpeth. Ministers and Opposition combined against him, and in the first year of the formal agitation of the Anti-Corn Law League he was out-voted by more than two to one.

Whigs and Tories were long obstinately combined against suggestions of any changes in the laws. The would-be reformers were chiefly found amongst the Radicals, though very naturally there were Liberals of nearly every shade who had recognised the necessity of free trade. In addition to those who have been named, there were men like Lord

Howick, Mr. C. P. Thompson, Sir George Grey, Sir Henry Parnell, Mr. Labouchere, Mr. Roebuck, and Mr. Clay. The latter brought forward a motion in 1837 for the adoption of a fixed duty of ten shillings a quarter; and, as Mr. Thorold Rogers observes in a volume already quoted, he had intended to persist in an annual motion to the same effect, if Mr. Villiers had not taken up the question in a more thorough-going manner.

The opinions of many Radicals on the subject of the Corn Laws were better known by their platform utterances outside Parliament than by their silent votes in the House. The advocacy of free trade figures largely and frequently in the election speeches and addresses of the fourth decade of the century. For instance Mr. Roebuck, a fiery Radical in his younger days, and one of the most uncompromising Chartist leaders, appealed in 1831 to the electors of Bath, and in a "rapid survey of abuses" declared war against the monopolists. "Under the head of persons paid for doing nothing," he said, "besides mere sinecurists, I include the whole body of monopolists, whether they be monopolising landlords, merchants, corporations, or bankers. They have peculiar privileges—privileges of money's worth, for which they render us no return—and for this reason, if for no other, their monopolies ought to be abolished. West India, East India, Bank, Corn Law, Corporation monopolies, must all be swept away. We must have free trade in everything; and this too without inquiring whether other nations will follow our example. If they be ignorant, there is no reason why we should act as if we were so. They will quickly find out their error if we set them the example of wisdom."

The example was set, and to some extent followed by other nations. In what fashion and with what result we shall hereafter inquire. Meanwhile a few pages may be pleasantly devoted to the catechist and the poet of the free trade movement—to Perronet Thompson and Ebenezer Elliott.





## CHAPTER VII.

### THE CORN LAW CATECHIST.

**C**OLONEL T. PERRONET THOMPSON, whose writings were freely drawn upon by the Council of the Anti-Corn Law League for arguments and illustrations, and whose *Corn Law Catechism* was one of the earliest works in which the fallacies of the protective system were popularly exposed, well deserves to be called the catechist of the school whereof Cobden was afterwards the lecturer and master. Indeed it is more than probable that Cobden himself owed much of his information and inspiration to Colonel Thompson, who had written most of his articles, tracts, and letters on political and economical reform before the future statesman had taken any active part in the campaign.

Colonel Thompson resided, after he had retired from the army, at Cambridge; and it was from Queen's College, in that University, that he dated the preface of his *Catechism on the Corn Laws* in February 1827, and of his *True Theory of Rent*, first published in 1826. If it may be concluded that the eight or ten weeks intervening between the publication of these two works sufficed the author to put the first-named into shape, the fact would testify no less to his enthusiasm

than to his ability and settled conviction. The *True Theory of Rent*, written in the form of a review of Mill's *Political Economy*, is an exposition of the fallacies of Ricardo and others, and is based on the principles of Adam Smith. It at once attracted notice to its anonymous writer; and it may be taken as a proof, if any were needed, of the valuable mental training afforded more than half a century ago by the positive teaching of the Cambridge lecture-rooms and curriculum, more particularly in respect of moral and economical philosophy.\* Colonel Thompson, however, was not first indoctrinated with philosophical ideas at this comparatively late period in his life, for we find in the collection of his works (published in 1842) a fragment *On Morals and Law*, written, as he tells us, in 1813, "in the intervals of military service in the European Peninsula by a subaltern of Light Dragoons." Five years before this Mr. Thompson had been Governor of Sierra Leone, the first one appointed by the Crown after the transference of that settlement from the Sierra Leone Company. According to his own statement, he was "ordered home as fast as possible," for the zeal with which he put the Slave Trade Abolition Act in motion, liberating a large number of slaves, and giving dire offence to the merchants and other dealers.

The first political productions of his pen showed the strong bent of his mind towards radical ideas; and they are marked by great shrewdness and energy. Colonel Thompson took an active part in the Reform movement of 1831-2, amongst other things writing a telling letter to Earl Grey, analysing the division in the House of Lords on the first rejection of the Reform Bill. In the election of 1835 he was returned to Parliament for the borough of Hull, with which he had a family connection. At the beginning of his candidature he had undertaken, if elected, to write to his

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\* Mr. Nassau Senior was Professor of Political Economy when Colonel Thompson resided there.

constituents a series of letters on the proceedings of Parliament; and he kept his word, writing during two sessions an average of two letters a week. They were printed as received in two of the local papers. Scattered through these letters the reader finds many discursive comments on the events and questions of the day, and not a few of them bear directly upon the subject of free trade.

In 1837, before the general election necessitated by the accession of the Queen, the "Working Men's Association" of London, being "anxious to have their political principles more prominently brought before the public, and particularly before the 'Liberal' members of Parliament,"\* called a meeting at the Crown and Anchor, in the Strand, which was attended by several members of the House of Commons, Colonel Thompson included; and an adjourned meeting was afterwards held at the British Coffee House. A petition was agreed upon, resolutions were passed (in favour of universal suffrage, equal representation, free election without reference to property, the ballot, and short Parliaments not exceeding a duration of three years); and the whole proceeding may be looked upon as the foundation of the celebrated Chartist movement. The Committee selected to draw up a Bill (that is the Charter) embodying the principles enumerated above, all of whom were present at the meetings and signed their names to the documents, were Daniel O'Connell, M.P., John Arthur Roebuck, M.P., John Temple Leader, M.P., Charles Hindley, M.P., Thomas Perronet Thompson, M.P., William Sharman Crawford, M.P., Henry Hetherton, John Cleave, James Watson, Richard Moore, William Lovett, and Henry Vincent. Mr. Fielden, M.P., Mr. Wakley, and Dr. Bowring, M.P., also signed their names in approval of the resolutions.

These, then, were the earliest and most active Chartist

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\* According to the *Northern Liberator* of 10th January 1840—the account being apparently contributed by Colonel Thompson himself.

leaders, and it speaks well for Colonel Thompson's consistency that, whilst many of his colleagues assumed a tone of bitterness towards the Anti-Corn Law League, and were undoubtedly jealous of its interference with their own more political objects, he was as ardent an economist in 1840 as he had been in 1827, and rendered efficient aid to the League.

The greatest aid of all was experienced from his little work (it was more than a pamphlet, since it occupied 120 pages) which he had entitled, "A Catechism on the Corn Laws, by a Member of the University of Cambridge." The first edition, as we have said, was published in 1827, and in 1840 it had reached its twentieth edition. The later issues were sold at sixpence, which implied the abandonment of all profit by the author; and, in addition to its circulation in this form, the council of the League printed and circulated wholesale, amongst its other tracts, a collection of passages from Colonel Thompson's miscellaneous writings.

The Catechism consisted of two parts—first, an introduction explaining the principles and operation of the Corn Laws, and, secondly, a series of questions and answers, with an exposure of many fallacies of the day, illustrating the former part, and set forth in a pithy manner, well calculated to rivet the attention of the reader. The introduction is based upon arguments already laid down in the *True Theory of Rent*. An imaginary case is put of the creation of a monopoly in the Isle of Wight for the production of food for the United Kingdom. The parallel is supported in a lively and spirited way, and the author arrives at his conclusions with as much vigour as ingenuity. But it is the concise reasoning and exposition of the Catechism itself that the strength of this production mainly resides. We will quote a few of the most characteristic portions.

The first half-dozen questions and answers take us at once into the middle of the controversy:—

Q. "What is meant by Corn Laws?"

A. "Laws which enact that the labourer shall not exchange his produce for food, except at certain shops—viz., the shops of the landowners; or not without paying a fine."

Q. "For whose benefit are these laws intended?"

A. "Manifestly of those who support them—the landowners."

Q. "What are the effects of these laws?"

A. "The same in kind as would arise from limiting the food consumed in the United Empire to what could be produced in the Isle of Wight."

Q. "What would be the consequences of such a limitation?"

A. "That the manufactures, wealth, and power of the United Empire must be limited to something like those of the Isle of Wight."

Q. "How would this be brought about?"

A. "First, by a general distress amongst the manufacturing labourers, arising from employment and wages being reduced to what afforded the smallest pittance of food upon which life could be supported; as is the case now.

"By a general glut and stagnation of trade, arising from more goods being manufactured than could possibly be sold with a living profit; as is the case now.

"By the impossibility of any man's prospering in any new manufacture, trade, or project; as is the case now.

"By the population, both of labourers and traders, being limited in proportion to the limitation of food—the first by hunger, the second by bankruptcy; as is the case now."

Here we have, as it were in a nutshell, the axioms and postulates of economical science as applied to the condemnation of the corn monopoly. The arguments were not new, even in 1827, and the author takes care, on more than one or two occasions, to point out that others before him had preached in the wilderness. He quotes Adam Smith and J. B. Say; he avows himself a disciple of Bentham: but to Colonel Thompson himself belongs the credit of setting forth the truths which he had mastered in their clear, compact, familiar form, which it was so easy for every one to understand, and which impressed the memories of the simplest

reader. We cannot wonder that the Anti-Corn Law League found it to their interest to give the widest possible circulation to such conclusive expositions of their creed as they found ready to their hands in the paragraphs above quoted.

From this beginning the Catechist proceeds to put and respond to the case of the monopolists, especially combatting the argument that the increased rents of the landlords, due to the protection of agriculture, represent a national gain. The controversial force and heat of the author are measured by the subjoined replies, which at the same time illustrate the thoroughness of his convictions and the uncompromising character of his attitude :—

Q. "What would be a sufficiently fair composition to offer to the owners of land ?

A. "That the community, on its part, would give up the inquiry into the claim rent has to be only equally taxed with manufacturing industry, if the landowners, on their part, would give up the idea of preventing men from having as much food as they can buy."

Q. "How should the injustice be removed, so as to produce the greatest good and the least suffering ?

A. "By removing it gradually. Give them time. Give them ten years if they please, beginning with the present, and taking off a tenth yearly, till it is gone. But remove it."

Q. "What should be done, if anything short of final removal was proposed ?

A. "A discerning community would clearly take all that was offered, and not relax in its endeavours to get the rest. Such a proposal leaves untouched the body of the wrong, and all the dangers arising from a sense of injustice. It is like the generosity of the feudal lord, who, instead of insisting on his *droit de seigneur* for the full tale of three nights, should graciously offer to compound for one."

Q. "Ought not the landlords, at least, to have a duty of five shillings by way of compensation for taxes ?

A. "By all means take off the taxes from them, whether it be just or not ; but do not let five shillings worth of taxes be raised from the landlords at the expense of fifty shillings to the rest of the community. Let it be settled that, like the *noblesse* in France, the landlords shall

pay no taxes, sooner than that what they do pay shall be recovered by a tenfold loss on the community.

"The English people have been in the habit of laughing at the French, calling them slaves, and all kinds of names, because before the revolution their aristocracy paid no taxes. In the eighteenth century the French aristocracy paid no taxes; and in the nineteenth the English aristocracy paid taxes, and recovered them through another tax that caused the community to lose the amount ten times over. Which side has a right to laugh? We are prodigiously stupid. *Our* posterity will have very little to say about the wisdom of their ancestors."

Then follows a string of three hundred and sixty-five fallacies from the literature of the day, with their refutations attached—from speeches of Lord Redesdale and others in Parliament, from contemporary newspapers, from articles in *Blackwood's* and other magazines, and from the current commonplaces of the third decade of our century. Many of these are very much to the point; whilst some touch only the fringe of the question. Colonel Thompson does not let us forget that he had in him the makings of a Chartist, as well as of an economical reformer. "What is the answer," he asks, "to the proposition—That the operatives are a lazy race, and seldom go to work before Wednesday?—A. The landlords never go to work at all." "That the landlords are marked out for spoliation?—A. They are marked out for the operation which is performed on a horse-leech by dipping its tail in salt. And they may think themselves well off that this is all. They will have their tails salted yet, they may depend upon it." "That the landlords are amiable and well-conducted; and their daughters handsome?—A. It may be true; but other men have handsome daughters to take care of too."

There is pith in the following paragraphs; and the rebuttal of the menace of revolution is particularly happy:—

Q. "That money may as well be taken from the fund-holders as from the landlords?"

A. "Thus saying that it is the same thing to defraud a just creditor

and to prevent a shopkeeper from raising his prices by a forcible monopoly."

Q. "That if expediency is to be the rule, away, away go all corn laws and public annuities together ?

A. "Justice is expediency. The payment of the public annuities is just, and therefore expedient. The corn laws are unjust and inexpedient in all other ways besides."

Q. "That the landlords, however, wish for no sweeping measures ; they only wish to be let alone ?

A. "When a man has possession without right, this is commonly what he wishes."

Q. "That the alteration is revolutionary and dangerous ?

A. "Not a word was said about revolution when the alteration was the other way. The danger is not so much in doing the thing as in leaving it undone. Everybody knows that if it is not done it is because a disproportionate share of the representation is in the hands of the landlords. Everybody knows, too, that for the rich not only to have the natural influence of their riches, but to have a monopoly of the representation besides, is in point of naked justice as unreasonable as if they were to claim not only to have the benefit of their riches in the market but to have the poor kept out in addition ; and that if the system stands, it is only because things go on tolerably well under it. If one order of individuals takes advantage of it to make the others keep them, things do *not* go on tolerably well ; and men will call out for a change. The middle classes in this country have an insuperable aversion to unnecessary changes ; but if they find out that their distresses, though not coming absolutely in the shape of want of bread, but in the shape of the bankruptcy of their sons and of their daughters' husbands, the general stagnation of trade and the impossibility of rising in the world by honourable industry, are traceable to a common cause—they will join the others and make a mass of opinion which it will be impossible to resist. If the landowners insist on thrusting the reason for radical reform into every man's ledger and meal-chest, they must take the consequences ; one thing or the other will give way. At the same time, the danger of change is on all sides greatly exaggerated. Under a despotic government nothing is done without an explosion ; but in a country so far advanced in freedom and habits of order as Great Britain, as soon as a suffering majority believes that a measure ought to pass, all opposition sneaks off. It will be interesting to see how long a nation that can read and write will go on believing that



the way to be wise is to do nothing that looks like common-sense. If one part of the nation complains that it is unrepresented, and consequently robbed, the other party comes forward to declare that it shall never be represented at all, unless their own voices are increased in an equal degree. If one calls out for a purge, the others cry out, 'Oh, but it will be unfair if you do not give me an astringent too.' And it never seems to occur to anybody that the question is not keeping up an equilibrium in the bowels of the patient, but of doing something that shall do him good. If any man desires experimental proof of the senselessness of what is termed virtual representation, let him take it in one word—Cornlaws."

We may add a few more exposures of current fallacies, chosen here and there from the pages of the Catechism, most of which were amongst those selected by the Council of the League for distribution:—

*Q.* "That if there is less business done between the landowners and the manufacturers, there must be a contraction of the currency?"

*A.* "The only consequence would be, that there would be fewer shillings and more silver spoons. The time is past when men could be deceived by tricks upon currency."

*Q.* "That the system of free trade must ruin England if adopted by her alone; and she must either give it up or enforce it universally?"

*A.* "When the draper buys bread, it may be very well if he can persuade the baker to buy clothes from him in turn. But if he cannot, it would be great folly to fancy he must be ruined because he refuses to buy bread. The Americans make a foolish tariff, by which they allow one-half of their people to rob the other, with a general loss equal to the difference in question besides. But that is no reason why England should do an equally foolish thing in reply. If an American chooses to put out one of his eyes, there is no necessity for an Englishman's doing the same for reciprocity."

*Q.* "That we are altogether in an artificial state, and, therefore, must go on as we are?"

*A.* "This only means that the community is losing by a great many hurtful monopolies, instead of one. Men are agreeing to vote for a general famine, for the promise of a halfpenny roll apiece themselves. Each sees the mischief of his neighbour's bargain, but fears to lose his own; and so all suffer like fools together. What the landowners really say, 'Let us rob you all, and then you shall rob one another.'"

This is the bargain they offer ; and the manufacturers swallow it open-mouthed."

Q. "That the countries where cheap corn is found are very miserable?

A. "The question is not whether those countries are happy, but whether having their corn would make us happy. The objection is like saying, 'On no account let your ladies wear furs. You have no idea what wretches the North-Western Indians are ; and above all, their women.' The misery of the people quoted proceeds neither from having corn nor from having furs, but from totally different causes, which our buying their corn or furs is one step towards removing."

Q. "That in the countries where corn is the dearest the manufacturing and trading classes are, in regard to both numbers and extent of business, beyond all calculation, more rich and prosperous than they are in those where corn is the cheapest ?

A. "It would be very odd if it were otherwise. Corn being dear, means that a great quantity of the commodities of manufacturers and traders is given for corn ; which can only happen where the manufacturers and traders have a great deal to give, and are so numerous as to make the competition great. The argument is like saying that where most is got by taking purses, it will be found there are most to take. It is the effect for the cause."

Q. "That people ought not to want to populate so much ?

A. "If Noah has shut himself up in his ark, and let his family eat nothing but what could be grown upon his decks, he would soon have had an outcry against population, and an emigration committee ; and Shem, Ham, and Japhet would have been 'distressed manufacturers.' And instead of reading lectures on not multiplying, his remedy would have been to let in foreign corn."

Q. "That emigration is no evil because it is voluntary ?

A. "And so is a man's cutting his throat. But there can be no right to inflict misery on an innocent man till he is driven to cut his throat."

The Catechism ends with a smart fusillade of fallacies and rejoinders on the subject of the English country gentleman :—

Q. "That the race of English country gentlemen, English farmers and English yeomen, is worth preserving ?

*A.* "Not if they are to be kept at the public expense. As long as they keep themselves everybody is glad to see them."

*Q.* "That a hold peasantry is their country's pride ?

*A.* "The hold peasantry must keep their country ; not the country them."

*Q.* "That the landlords are the Corinthian capital of society ?

*A.* "And must therefore of necessity be supported by the rest."

*Q.* "That they are a source of light and knowledge to the lower orders ?

*A.* "They teach them what they are anxious they should learn ; and others do the same."

*Q.* "That they have sound political principles ?

*A.* "They take the side they think best for themselves ; and others do so too."

*Q.* "That they fought the battle against the Jacobins ?

*A.* "Which other people are to pay for."

*Q.* "That all they get they expend ?

*A.* "Most other people do the same."

*Q.* "That they are supporters of the fine arts ?

*A.* "Which produce the same effects in any other hands."

*Q.* "That they feed fat cattle ?

*A.* "And are paid for them."

*Q.* "That they keep up rural sports ?

*A.* "Men have no claim to be paid for amusing themselves as they like best."

*Q.* "That they kill foxes and otters ?

*A.* "The mole-catcher would do it better."

*Q.* "That they sit at quarter sessions ?

*A.* "And strange things they sometimes do there. For instance, in Buckinghamshire they sentenced John Doe to five months imprisonment for intending to assault the lord's hen-pheasant, and Richard Roe to three for assaulting the serf's daughter."

*Q.* "That they are the unpaid magistracy ?

*A.* "If they demand to be kept, they are not."

Q. "That they are good moral characters ?

A. "Other men are so too. But it is impossible for all moral men to be kept."

Q. "That they are generous, brave, and humane ?

A. "All Englishmen, from time immemorial, by their own account, have been so too."

Q. "That nobody could do without them ?

A. "Nobody could do without everybody. But everybody cannot be kept at the public expense."

Many of these sentences have become proverbial in the mouths of politicians and economists ; and the Catechism as a whole stamped its author as one of the most vigorous and successful leaders in the Anti-Corn Law crusade. The catechetical form of teaching was very popular in the controversy of the age, and Colonel Thompson resorted to it from time to time in the *Spectator*, the *Sun*, and elsewhere. Nearly a thousand exposures in all were published by him in the course of the free trade movement ; but it was the "Catechism" which first struck the prolific vein, and which did most to educate the assailants of the Corn Laws.





## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE CORN LAW RHYMER.

**E**BENEZER ELLIOTT, whose *Corn Law Rhymes* were published at intervals between 1831 and 1846, was born at Masborough, near Rotherham, in Yorkshire, in the year 1781. His father was an ironfounder, and was himself an author in a small way, having printed in 1798 a "Paraphrase on the Book of Job, agreeable to the meaning of the Sacred Text;" but we should probably have heard little or nothing of either of them if it had not been for the ardour with which the son threw himself into the Anti-Corn Law movement, and the vigorous expression which he gave to his sympathy with the poor, and to his indignation against the monopolists. At an early age, and whilst still following his father's calling, he seems to have been deeply touched by the sufferings of the working classes, and the fervour of his benevolence is conspicuous in all his poems, contemplative as well as aggressive.

The first collection of Elliott's poems was printed in 1823, and they stamped him at once as a genuine interpreter of nature and humanity. He was in some sense a disciple of Crabbe, though excelling him in the brilliance of his imagination, and especially in his sweet pictures of natural

scenery. Even these earlier outpourings of his poetic muse are dashed here and there with the bitter strain of indignation, as though the poet could never for a moment forget, amidst the charms of nature, all the discords of the world around him. Like his great contemporary Wordsworth, he was grieved to think ("what man has made of man," ) and he could not leave the thought behind him even when he entered on the domains of pure fancy. Note, for instance, the rapid change from tenderness to bitterness in the four beautiful stanzas from a poem called "The Excursion":—

"Dear children ! when the flowers are full of bees,  
When sun-touched blossoms shed their fragrant snow ;  
When song speaks like a spirit, from the trees  
Whose kindled greenness hath a golden glow ;  
When, clear as music, rill and river flow,  
With trembling hues, all changeful, tinted o'er  
By that bright pencil which good spirits know  
Alike in earth and heaven—'tis sweet, once more,  
Above the sky-tinged hills to see the storm-bird soar.

"'Tis passing sweet to wander, free as air,  
Blithe truants in the bright and breeze-blessed day,  
Far from the town—where stoop the sons of care  
O'er plans of mischief, till their souls turn gray,  
And dry as dust, and dead-alive are they—  
Of all self-buried things the most unblessed :  
O morn to them no blissful tribute pay !  
O night's long courted slumbers ! bring no rest  
To men who laud man's foes, and deem the basest best !

"God ! would they handcuff Thee ? and, if they could,  
Chain the free air, that, like the daisy, goes  
To every field, and bid the warbling wood  
Exchange no music with the willing rose  
For love-sweet odours, where the woodbine blows,  
And trades with every cloud, and every beam  
Of the rich sky ? Their gods are bonds and blows,  
Rocks and blind shipwreck ; and they hate the stream  
That leaves them still behind, and mocks their changeless dream.

"They know ye not, ye flowers that welcome me,  
Thus glad to meet, by trouble parted long !  
They never saw ye—never may they see  
Your dewy beauty, when the throstle's song  
Floweth like starlight, gentle, calm, and strong !  
Still, Avarice, starve their souls ! still, lowest Pride,  
Make them the meanest of the basest throng !  
And may they never, on the green hill's side,  
Embrace a chosen flower, and love it as a bride !"

The simple mention of the word "town" brought up vividly before the poet all the miserable contrast between the squalid home of the dwellers in the great cities and the calm and peaceful beauty which he had been describing.

The sternness of the times soon gave prominence to Elliott's harder muse—hard, that is to say, not in want of sympathy with nature and with his kind, but in severity born of the very excess of his sympathy. He began to look on the question of the popular distress as a political question, a problem capable of solution, and in the solution of which he might himself take part. He cast in his lot with those who publicly and incessantly condemned the Corn Laws, and resolved to devote his talents to the advance of the movement. He did so with less fuss than Cobbett, and perhaps with more force, undeterred by the reproaches and ridicule of his critics.

"For thee, my country, thee, do I perform,  
Sternly the duty of a man born free ;  
Heedless, though ass, and wolf, and venomous worm,  
Shake ears and fangs, with brandished bray, at me."

The *Corn Law Rhymes* had an immense influence on public opinion, especially amongst the masses. Some of them were sung at meetings ; others were constantly quoted and referred to, and the author was recognised as one of the great forces by which the reform was rendered inevitable. Perhaps the most familiar of his rhymes, and the one which found its way most directly to the hearts of the people, was

that which compared the people of England to "Caged Rats." Few things more sharp and cutting will be met with in the polemical songs of the century.

"Ye coop us up and tax our bread,  
 And wonder why we pine ;  
 But ye are fat, and round, and red,  
 And filled with tax-bought wine.  
 Thus twelve rats starve while three rats thrive  
 (Like you on mine and me),  
 When fifteen rats are caged alive,  
 With food for nine and three.

"Hark ! Havoc's torch begins to glow—  
 The ending is begun ;  
 Make haste ! Destruction thinks ye slow ;  
 Make haste to be undone !  
 Why are ye called, ' My Lord,' and ' Squire,'  
 While fed by mine and me,  
 And wringing food, and clothes, and fire  
 From bread-taxed misery ?

"Make haste, slow rogues ! *prohibit* trade,  
*Prohibit* honest gain ;  
 Turn all the good that God hath made  
 To fear, and hate, and pain ;  
 Till beggars all, assassins all,  
 All cannibals we be,  
 And death shall have no funeral,  
 From shipless sea to sea."

The *Corn Law Rhymes* were written for men of little refinement of manner, who were not accustomed to weigh words, and who would not have been so shrewdly touched by poems of a too fastidious character. The first volume, indeed, was "printed by order of the Sheffield Mechanics' Anti-Bread Tax Society," and it was at the time commonly supposed to be the work of a mechanic. These facts should be remembered as we read Elliott's verses, some of which are the fierce and savage outpourings of a mind consumed with indignation. The poet Southey, a personal friend of the Rhymer, and himself a Tory, wrote a critique on Elliott's



works for the *Quarterly Review*, which, however, was declined at the last moment by the editor, who doubtless thought it somewhat strong meat for his readers. Though Southey professedly reproves the author for his harsh language, an under-current of sympathy is manifest. The following passage is a good example of much of the conventional criticism of the day:—

“The demon of anarchy has never inspired anything more ferocious than the whole of the Corn Law Rhymes—those poems which have given Mr. Elliott his ‘crowning’ fame. He might be congratulated on that fame if the power and vigour of these pieces could be contemplated apart from the spirit that they breathe and the purposes to which they are devoted; but if the vials of wrath are to be poured out upon this guilty nation, and the author should live to see the fulfilment of his poetical and political prophecies—(wishes we will not call them)—it will be to him like ‘Luke’s iron crown;’ and ‘Damien’s bed of steel’ could not inflict upon him keener pangs than he would feel in reflecting that, to the utmost of his power, he had contributed to inflame the madness of the people. . . . Not in a spirit of ill-will, but earnestly, and as a Christian admonition, we entreat him to take this warning into his calmest and most serious consideration. Mr. Elliott is but half a Radical; for in the fiercest of his effusions there is an avowal of Christian belief.”

This was in Southey’s grandest style; but what follows is better still:—

“Repulsive, and even hateful as his invectives are, it is not difficult to perceive where the root of his error lies; and that the root is good, though it is upon a worse than Upas graft, a graft of Zaccoum—the Tree of Hell—that it now bears poisonous fruit! He has ‘considered all the oppressions which are done under the sun,’ and ‘the tears of such as are oppressed and have no comforter;’ he has regarded those ‘of whose labour there is no end,’ and those also ‘whose insatiable eye no riches can satisfy.’ But the light which leads him astray is not ‘a light from heaven!’ . . . ‘Is it strange,’ he says, ‘that my language is fervent as a welding heat, when my thoughts are *passions*, that rush burning from my mind, like white-hot bolts of steel?’ And is it strange, we would ask, if one who lets these fiery passions take the place of thought, should be misled by them? . . . That the poor are too poor is a truth which we have proclaimed as loudly as the ‘Corn

Law Rhymer,' but in a different spirit and in a different tone; and that there are cases in which the rich are too rich, because in proportion to the growth of their riches is the consequent increase of poverty and wretchedness, is another and not less momentous truth, which it would be worse than folly to dream of concealing, while that poverty and that wretchedness are trumpet-tongued in proclaiming it."\*

So much for Southey; let us return to the "Corn Law Rhymer" himself. Few ideas in Elliott's polemical writings were more prominent, or more sad, than his suggestions of the hopelessness of the sufferers' condition. This idea is expressed with dramatic force in the following lines:—

"SCENE—*A wide plain, covered with skeletons and snow.*

*Enter PAYALL and ALLBELLY.*

*Payall.* Heart of mud and brain of steel!  
What hast thou been doing?

*Allbelly.* Calming tumult, curing ruin—  
Eating children, fathers, mothers,  
Nieces, nephews, sisters, brothers;  
Heap'd thousands at a meal.

*Payall.* All-maw! all-cursing! all-accursed!  
Thou'rt loathsome as thy food.

*Allbelly.* I eat them up to do them good;  
To do them good, I starve them first.  
To plunder is to bless,  
To murder is to save:  
What could men less, in thankfulness,  
Than feed this living grave?  
But not their flesh alone  
Doth my vast hunger need;  
On torture's groan, on famine's moan  
On mute despair I feed:  
My fateless greed  
Their all of life controls:  
I eat their souls.

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\* "More Verse and Prose by the Corn Law Rhymer." Vol. II.

*The plain is suddenly darkened, and a gigantic Shadow enters, deepening the gloom.*

*Shadow [to Allbelly].* Eternal Stink ! where are my children ?

*Allbelly.* Here.

*Shadow.* Where ?

*Allbelly.* I am they.

*Shadow.* Maggot ! hast thou no fear of me ?

*Allbelly.* Thee ? I am Maggot.

*Shadow [to Payall].* Misery ! Hast thou no hope ?

*Payall.* None, none—nor trust in thee :

Why should I have, if thou permitt'st to be  
That loathsome monster ? or a thing like me ?”

In a note to this fragment Elliott informs us that it originated in a conversation which he had had with a gentleman in a railway carriage, who “asserted the worn-out and infernal blasphemy, that the Corn Laws were enacted to benefit the consumers ! One would think,” the author adds, “that our Protectionists (if they are, as they seem never tired of proving, at once the worst and the most insolent of criminals) might be satisfied with having escaped hanging ; yet they continue to act as if they thought themselves still privileged to outrage the common sense of every victim whom they have not yet quite succeeded in stamping into the grave !”

It will be seen that Elliott could write as vehemently in prose as in verse ; and we can easily conceive how rasping would be the effect of such reproaches upon supporters of the Corn Laws, who really believed that these laws had nothing to do with the popular distress.

As Southey said, Ebenezer Elliott was a man of strong religious feeling—though this fact does not seem to have prevented him from being an utter and entire Radical. Many of his poems bear witness to his devotional earnest-

ness ; and there is something peculiarly touching in his ode on "The Poor Man's Day," from which we take the following beautiful stanzas :—

"From the fever  
(Idle never,  
Where on Hope Want bars the door),  
From the gloom of airless alleys,  
Lead thou to green hills and valleys  
Weary Lordland's trampled poor.

"Pale young mother !  
Gasping brother !  
Sister, toiling in despair !  
Grief-bow'd sire, that life-long diest !  
White-lipp'd child, that sleeping sighest !  
Come and drink the light and air.

"Still God liveth ;  
Still he giveth  
What no law can take away ;  
And, oh Sabbath ! bringing gladness  
Unto hearts of weary sadness,  
Still art thou ' The Poor Man's Day.'"

The first series of the *Corn Law Rhymes* was printed, as we have said, in 1831 (in the form of a thick pamphlet, with paper covers, at the low price of ninepence). A second series was published in London two years later. The two volumes, entitled "More Verse and Prose by the Corn-Law Rhymers," were not issued until 1850, one year after the author's death ; but many of the pieces in this collection had appeared separately from time to time. They cover the whole period up to the final repeal of the obnoxious laws ; and it is worth while to notice one of the latest of Elliott's poetical diatribes, which describes the condition of "England in 1844." In these lines we have a long catalogue of the follies and cant of the time, as seen from the Rhymers's point of view ; and a ghastly panorama is

spread before us, full of flitting shadows, gibbeted statesmen—

“ Rascaldom, Parsondom,  
 Lazy big Beggardom,  
 Playing the fool ; ”

“ breadtaxers stealing rates ; ” “ brassface and timberface, half-faced by Doubleface ; ” “ law working ruin well ”—as for instance :—

“ Four thousand poachers caught—  
 Rascalry's statute-taught  
 Doctors of laws ! . . .

“ Whigs, for th' exchequer's good  
 Landing restricted food ;  
 Cheered by the House. . . .

“ Jacky Finality  
 Still for the ‘ quality.’ . . .

“ Plenty the farmer's hell—  
 Sliding-scale works so well !  
 Radnor and common sense  
 (Confound their impudence !)  
 Calling lies, lies.”

Thrust follows thrust, and truth drives truth home, in this eloquent picture of the night before the dawn. But there is a whisper of hope and confidence in the last two stanzas, which bring before us the most prominent men of the day, whose long and bitter struggle was now rapidly approaching an end :—

“ Cobden, our ‘ Man of Men,’  
 Doing the work of ten,  
 Each worth a score !  
 Bright (star and dove of peace,  
 Hampden of love and peace),  
 Villiers (for honest men,  
 Storming the robber's den),  
 Worth fifty more !

“Peel, hardest task’d of all,  
Gagg’d, kick’d, and mask’d for all,  
Cooking his hash ;  
Slandered man, wily man,  
Bare back and empty pan,  
Gloomily waiting all  
For the great general—  
General Crash !”

Such, then, was the poet of the Anti-Corn Law movement, and at once the pioneer and the follower of Cobden and the League. We have allowed him to carry us hurriedly over the ground of the conflict, which it will be our business in the succeeding chapters to review with greater deliberation ; but there is yet another contribution to the history of the struggle for which we must be indebted to Ebenezer Elliott. The Sheffield Mechanics’ Anti-Bread Tax Society, already referred to, was one of the earliest of the associations which the League subsequently united in a single organised body. It issued its “Declaration” in 1831—before the Parliamentary Reform Bill had been passed, and fifteen years before the Corn Laws were virtually repealed. This document, with Elliott’s comments upon it, will convey an accurate idea of the popular agitation which at that date was beginning to force the demand for abolition into the front rank of political questions.

The Declaration of the Sheffield mechanics was as follows :—

“Convinced that the mechanics are the only body of men in this country sufficiently independent to oppose, with any chance of success, the hosts of corruptionists who are feeding on our labour, and at the same time limiting the market for our productions ; trusting also that we shall speedily be joined by every wise and good mechanic in the empire, and supported by the yet undebased portion of the middle-class of our countrymen, if any such there be,—We, the Sheffield Mechanics’ Anti-Bread Tax Society, declare, that in a fully-peopled country it is an act of national suicide to restrict the exchange of manufactured goods for corn ; because where there is a law which restricts the

necessaries and comforts of life, profits and wages being nowhere worth more than the necessaries and comforts which they will purchase, are demonstrably measured by the restriction ;—That the present Corn Law, while it enables a few thousand landed annuitants to convert the general loss into a temporary but ultimately fatal gain to themselves, is destructive of everything which is valuable to us as men ; and that, while that law, and the will and power to alter it for the worse, continue as they are, no reduction of taxation, how extensive soever, can be other than a mere transfer of a certain amount of the public money from the Government to the landlords. We therefore further declare,—That, as we cannot escape from the consequence of the Corn Law (except by causing it to be repealed, or by emigrating with our heart-broken wives and children), we will, by all the legal means in our power, oppose the horrible anti-profit law, *alias* Corn Law ; and never remit our exertions until the monopoly of the first necessary of life be utterly destroyed. The case of our oppressors, as stated by themselves, furnishes unanswerable reasons why we ought no longer to maintain them in their present character of palaced paupers. They say they cannot live without alms. If the assertion be true, why do they not go to the workhouse for their pay as other paupers do ? If it be not true, why are they not sent to the tread-mill for obtaining money under false pretences ? *These questions suggest two others.* We, however, insist not yet on compensation for the past.”

Ebenezer Elliott stood sponsor for this “Declaration,” and enforced it with some remarks of his own, which were printed at the same time, and quoted by Southey with ingenuous candour, though not without a sneer at the “professors of Jeremy-Benthamism.” No doubt Bentham was one of Elliott’s masters and teachers, as he was of Perronet Thompson also.

“When the Sheffield Mechanics’ Anti-Bread Tax Society was first instituted, the members, in common with most of their countrymen, had almost ceased to hope for a reform in Parliament. Determined to invite the legal co-operation of all the oppressed throughout the kingdom, they formed themselves into an association, with the design of attacking a particular point in the enemy’s line. By overthrowing the Corn Laws, they knew they would compel their enemies themselves to become reformers. The announcement of the Reform Bill, in the infancy of their union, induced them to suspend their operations. Had

not that announcement been made, the Society would at this time, I doubt not, have influenced, as members and co-operators, at least five hundred thousand adult males ! They who doubt this startling assertion will make what allowance they please for the exaggeration of a poetical imagination ; but I beg of them to remember that the Birmingham Political Union originally consisted of four members only. Should the Reform Bill disappoint our just expectations, the Sheffield Mechanics' Anti-Bread Tax Society is still in existence. It may yet be necessary to array a Political Union of all the plundered against all the thieves ; and I must in candour say, that it will not be the fault of the latter if the very next contest which history will have to record will not be that of the People of Great Britain *v.* Fifty Thousand Palaced Panpers. In fact, that contest is already begun. What is the struggle which now agitates the empire but the beginning of the end—the great question of profit and wages, *alias* bread, bread, bread—and whether the Tories, by continuing to tax it, shall destroy the nation with themselves ? One would think the answer cannot much longer be doubtful—No ! ”

Elliott takes the same occasion of entering on the subject of the Sheffield trade, which at that moment was affected by the simultaneous action of a foreign demand for its manufactures and a reaction produced by the general discontent of English working-men. We continue to quote from Mr. Southey's paper :—

“I cannot conclude without a few remarks on the present state of the trade of Sheffield, as connected with the tendency of the Corn Laws. The Germans, being able to buy the necessaries of life without restriction, are becoming dangerous competitors to us ; but in consequence of the troubles on the Continent, our merchants have lately received many orders, which in other circumstances would have been executed abroad ; and the great and sudden demand for our goods has caused a general strike for increased wages. The present glut of orders, then, is an accident ; but gluts and scarcities generally are the results of absurd legislation ; and I might assert, without fear of refutation, that if trade were universally free neither gluts nor scarcities could to any great extent, or for any great length of time, exist. This, then, is the favourable moment for the repeal of the Corn Laws. If we wait until the Continent is pacified, and our rivals enter again into active competition with us, the advance which has here



taken place in wages will be another premium in their favour. But who does not see that, until the Corn Laws are repealed, the great question of wages can never be settled in England?—that gluts must alternate with scarcities?—gluts of orders with gluts of goods?—that the feast of to-day must be followed by the famine of to-morrow?—insolence by humiliation, humiliation by insolence? and that, with the intemperance and want of forethought resulting from the absence of a *steady* demand for goods, the conflicts and heartburnings of the employers and the employed must continue? But how long will such a state of things yet last? Can we compete for ever with unbread-taxed rivals? (No! capital will go where it will pay: skill will follow capital;) and our manufacturers will at length stop, simultaneously, and for ever! The immense camp of London will then be *without pay*; the immense camp of Glasgow will be *without pay*; the immense camp of the West Riding of Yorkshire will be *without pay*, and almost within shout of a still more multitudinous camp—that of Lancashire, also *without pay*! And all this may happen; and if the Corn Laws remain much longer on the statute-book, *will* happen, perhaps in one and the same week, day, or hour! If I am called upon to produce from history a record of similar catastrophes, I shall answer that history can furnish no record of a *similar state of things*. The British Government is the only one that ever legislated *against* the bread of its people, by impeding the exchange of manufactured goods for food, at the very moment when such exchange ought to have been facilitated by all possible or conceivable means.”

The Rhymer's prose, it will be admitted, was as nervous and forcible as his verse. No wonder Southey had scarcely the heart to visit him personally with very severe blame.





## CHAPTER IX.

### COBDEN'S EARLY LIFE.

**R**ICHARD COBDEN was born at Dunford, near Midhurst, in Surrey, on June 3rd, 1804. It was the same decade which was to see the birth of Lord Beaconsfield and Mr. Gladstone. Of these three men, Cobden started with fewest advantages, and decidedly with the least ambition. By comparison, therefore, he achieved the greatest results; for he undertook the advocacy of a cause which had nothing to recommend it except its logical strength, and he lived to see his views accepted by the Parliamentary leaders of both parties. He had no Parliamentary knowledge or training when he was selected by a large constituency to plead the cause of Free Trade in the House of Commons, and perhaps if he had survived to this day he would never have acquired the skill in dealing with men and measures that his two great coevals have displayed. But it is certain that in the best sense of the term he deserves to be numbered amongst the most memorable statesmen of the nineteenth century.

An agitator, as such, and so long as he continues to be an agitator, may have thoroughly statesmanlike instincts; but the very fact of his appealing direct to the people,

and against the Parliament which formally represents the people, implies that he deliberately resigns all pretension to the name of statesman in its ordinary signification. But the agitator of a great political question may have wider, sounder, and more prudent views in regard to the government of the State than the men who happen to be holding its helm and directing its course; and in that case the triumph of the agitation brings with it the confidence of the people in their instructors, and the formal classification of these instructors in the rank of Parliamentary statesmen. It was so with Mr. Gladstone a few years ago, after he had stepped out, as it were, from the Parliamentary ranks, and had appealed successfully to the masses. It was so with Richard Cobden, who passed direct from his early convictions to the stage of popular agitation, and from the stage of agitation to the levels of formal and conventional statesmanship.

Cobden's father was a farmer, who died when his son was young, and without having prospered in his occupation, though he farmed, at least in part, his own land. In his political speeches, on more than one or two occasions, Mr. Cobden refers to the circumstances of his early life. "My father," he said in a speech at Norwich in 1843, "lost his property as a tenant farmer, and I fled from the family occupation to a manufacturing district, in hopes of finding that independence which was denied to me in the far more preferable pursuit of farming." The death of the father occurred whilst the son was still a mere boy, and to this it was due that Cobden's early education was scanty and imperfect. He had been sent to the small grammar school at Midhurst, where he seems to have given evidence of talent above the average of his schoolfellows; but on the death of his father he was removed to London, and soon afterwards entered the warehouse of his uncle, a merchant named Partridge, in Watling Street. Before he was thirty

years old he had travelled extensively for the firm, and had so completely mastered the business, and made so many friends, that he conceived an ambition to found a mercantile house on his own account. Being without capital, he accepted the offer of two friends, and, borrowing a sum of five hundred pounds, entered into partnership with them in an agency for the sale of printed cotton goods. They established themselves in Manchester, in a house in Mosley Street, in the year 1832; and the junior partner in the firm of Gillett, Foster, and Cobden developed excellent business capacities, and in particular that faculty for impressing and winning the confidence of other men which was his most distinguished characteristic throughout his career. By his personal address he secured the agency for a large cotton printing house at Sabden, near Clitheroe, which enabled his firm to establish a London agency. After a time they took over the Sabden Works from Mr. Fort; and thus within four or five years from his first venture in an independent way of business, Cobden found himself in the enjoyment of a considerable income.

Mr. Ashworth, from whose interesting volume of recollections\* most of these details are derived, bears witness to the character enjoyed by his friend in Manchester, to the solidity of his business repute, and to his personal qualities and force of character. It was in 1837 that Mr. Ashworth became acquainted with Richard Cobden, through the introduction of a common friend. In the same year the British Association met at Liverpool, and Mr. Ashworth read a paper on the subject of "A recent strike at Preston," which, as he tells us, "brought together a good many political economists." It may have been at this time, though it was probably at a much earlier date, that Cobden began to direct his attention very closely to the economical

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\* *Recollections of Richard Cobden, M.P.* (Cassell & Co.).

condition of the country ; and Mr. Ashworth's narrative is interesting as giving us the first indication of his friend's resolution to attack the Corn Laws.

Speaking of the economists who had come to Liverpool to attend the Association meeting, Mr. Ashworth mentions that the subjects of the Corn Law, Protection, and Monopoly were frequently under discussion amongst them, and were denounced as great obstacles to the commercial progress of the country, especially the first-named, "as being the most flagrant, and the sustaining buttress of the whole fabric of legislative monopoly." "Mr. Cobden and I," he continues, "being members of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce, had often conferred together upon the mischievous influence of the Corn Law ; but the discussions raised by Mr. Foster and his friends so aroused his feelings that it became almost a constant topic of conversation with him ; and one evening, after a soiree at the Liverpool Town Hall, he stopped suddenly, as we were walking quietly at midnight up Pembroke Place, and with some abruptness said: 'I'll tell you what we will do ; we'll use the Chamber of Commerce for an agitation to repeal the Corn Law.' My reply was that it could not be done, that the rules of the chamber would not admit of it, and that the subscriptions to the chamber would be inadequate for the purpose ; therefore the agitation, if undertaken, must be independent, and must be provided with funds raised for the special purpose. He seemed disappointed, and said : 'Well, my income is so safe that I would not give anyone five per cent. to assure it ; and I am determined to put forth my strength for the repeal of these Corn and Provision Laws.'"

Here spoke the enthusiasm, the confidence, and the determination of the man who was to be the life and soul of a vast and patriotic movement. He may have underestimated the work on which he was about to enter. Mr.

Ashworth says very truly that, counting the odds which were arrayed against them—"on one side a few comparatively unknown and uninfluential men, and, on the other, almost the entire ruling class of the country"—it was wonderful that even a seven years' struggle, and the expenditure of nearly half-a-million, should have prevailed over the opposing prejudices. But Cobden had more than his money to bring to the contest; and, as we have seen, the times were ripening for the harvest.

Cobden did not forget his resolves when the Liverpool meetings and banquets were at an end, and he had gone back to the routine of his office. He was occupied, soon after his return to Manchester, in conjunction with his friends, in securing a charter of incorporation for several of the new manufacturing towns of South Lancashire, under the Act of 1835. The fact is worthy of note, not simply as illustrating the progressive and energetic spirit of the men who founded what was afterwards known as "the Manchester School," but also because it marks the date at which this great centre of the growing cotton trade became the leader and model of the new commercial corporations. Manchester had become known as a centre of reforming organisation before Cobden went to live there—as was indicated in a previous chapter by a quotation from Mr. Greville's Diary. But the recruit was a host in himself—"doing the work of ten, each worth a score," as the Rhymer presently said of him.

The battle of Free Trade, so far as Mr. Cobden and his Manchester friends were actively concerned in it, was begun in the Chamber of Commerce, much as Cobden had suggested to Mr. Ashworth in Liverpool. At a meeting of the Chamber, held late in 1838, a proposal was made to petition Parliament for a modification of the import duties on corn and on other articles of food. On this, Cobden, Mr. Ashworth, and Mr. J. B. Smith prepared an alter-

native petition, praying for the total repeal of the duties. Cobden having moved the adoption of this petition at an adjourned meeting of the Chamber, it was found that the majority were in favour of the bolder measure, which was carried on a division by five or six to one. This triumph drew the "first blood" in the campaign, and it incited the merchants and manufacturers who had won it to proceed without delay to the initiation of a special movement for the agitation of the question. In less than a month after the meeting of the Chamber of Commerce, the Anti-Corn Law League had come into existence.

Cobden's career was now fairly before him. He had already shown to his friends and acquaintance the stuff of which he was made, and a few months sufficed for him to show it to the country also. It may be well to mention, before we proceed, that he was in every way well equipped for his enterprise. Though his schooldays had been short, it would be a mistake to suppose that he was an uneducated and imperfectly informed man. He had himself made up for the deficiencies of early training. His life in London was a studious one; he had read much, he had made himself a good French scholar, and, as his speeches abundantly prove, he had studied political economy to good purpose. He had travelled whenever an opportunity presented itself—one voyage to Egypt having been made shortly before the date at which we have arrived. He was thus a man of some cultivation; and the instinctive refinement of his mind, with his excellent moral qualities, enabled him to maintain his dignity throughout an anxious and troubled period, during which he was subjected to a good deal of misrepresentation and abuse.

Professor Thorold Rogers, writing of him as a near connection in the preface to his volume on *Cobden and Modern Political Opinion*, tells us that he was "ready to speak upon every topic of public interest," and that "his

knowledge of facts was as remarkable as the clearness with which he interpreted the moral or political significance of events. A diligent reader and an acute observer, he was possessed in the highest degree of that inductive faculty which enables a few men to grasp great principles, and of that logical precision which endows a few more with the power of determining the true relations of any public event. With those who believe that the highest political sagacity consists in negotiating the terms of a compromise, the precision and breadth of Cobden's opinions is always mistaken for narrowness. This is the charge which the trimmer always alleges against the man of strong and deep convictions."

The principles and the convictions which had taken entire possession of Cobden's mind were of such a kind that compromise was impossible, however much he, as a man, might have been disposed to compromise them. The issue, indeed, which he had raised was simply whether there should be, or could be, any compromise of the strict laws of political economy. These laws, as Adam Smith had shown, were laws of natural freedom and development, and to have admitted the possibility of a compromise in them would have implied the surrender of the very principles on which the agitation was founded.







## CHAPTER X.

### THE ANTI-CORN LAW LEAGUE (1839-1841).

N the 10th of January, 1839, the "Anti-Corn Law Association" was set on foot at a meeting at the York Hotel, Manchester. Mr. J. B. Smith, then chairman of the Chamber of Commerce, was elected President, and amongst the earliest members and subscribers were Cobden, Henry and Edmund Ashworth, Thomas Bazley, W. R. Callender, and Archibald Prentice, the conductor of a local paper, and subsequently the historian of the League. These men did not set about their work in a wild or niggardly spirit. They aimed at establishing an organisation "in a manner commensurate with the magnitude of the obstacles to be surmounted, and worthy of the object for which it was established." Cobden urged his friends to "invest a part of their property to save the rest from confiscation;" and the result was that before a month had passed they had a fund at their disposal of more than six thousand pounds.

There were Anti-Corn Law and Anti-Bread Taxations already in existence, like the one at Sheffield for which Ebenezer Elliott wrote his poems. The Manchester Association was not, therefore, a new departure in every sense. It

differed from the existing or preceding bodies in scope and width rather than in kind, and it was intended to guide and combine the efforts of commercial reformers, which had hitherto been more or less desultory in their aims. A feeling of this kind no doubt caused the Manchester men to alter their title to "The National Anti-Corn Law League," and in a short time they were in active correspondence and sympathy with many other associations and individuals throughout the country. An office was taken in Newall's Buildings, Market Street. One of the first duties undertaken by the officers was to collect information on the subject of the popular distress. Help of various kinds began to flow in; public meetings were held, and attended by deputations from Manchester; and the year 1839 had not advanced far before the League was recognised as a potent fact. New branches were opened, lecturers were engaged, men of influence sent in their adhesion; the work grew in importance and in efficiency as it proceeded; and thus Cobden and his friends soon realised the vastness of the labour which they had taken in hand.

The eagerness with which the new organisation was responded to and supported throughout the country was very remarkable. Public opinion on this great economical question had been growing stronger and stronger from year to year; and it was with instant and general enthusiasm that men saw the standard fairly raised, and the gage of battle thrown down. The year 1839, thus auspiciously opened by the new League, is memorable for the frequency and spirited character of the meetings held in many large towns of England, and especially in the north. It was now that the Chartists began to put forth their strength against the threatened diversion of the popular mind from the political abuses of the time; and in this effort they met with variable success. At Birmingham they carried their resolutions against those of the Anti-Corn Law leaders who had called

the meeting. At Leeds they failed in a similar attempt. Mr. Feargus O'Connor on the latter occasion had moved a resolution in the following terms:—"That we consider all restrictions upon the importation of foreign grain as unjust in principle and injurious in effect; nevertheless we are of opinion that no salutary alteration can be made in the present system until those for whose benefit the change is contemplated shall have a voice in the choice of those representatives to whom shall be entrusted the power of preventing the recurrence of so great an evil as the present Corn Law." \*

This resolution expresses the sense in which the more conciliatory advocates of the Charter sought to defeat an agitation which they regarded as partial, compromising, and therefore unwise. The feeling was natural enough, and resolutions like that which has been cited were well fitted to obtain support in Anti-Corn Law meetings. So long as the Chartists were fair in their opposition, no one could complain of them. They naturally attached the greatest importance to their comprehensive six points, and they were quite right in arguing that with universal suffrage the people could easily abolish the Corn Laws for themselves, and do many other things which they desired. But the economists answered that they were unable to wait for the conquest of the Charter, that starving men must have food before votes, that there were many of their own supporters who could not support the six points, and so forth. The Chartists saw the force of these arguments; and the more impatient amongst them occasionally lost their temper, and treated the free traders as though they were enemies. But the violence of language and action indulged in by O'Connor and his friends brought their cause into continually greater odium, whilst the peaceful agitation of the Anti-Corn Law

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\* See Irving's *Annals of Our Time*, Jan. 15, 1839.

League commended itself from the very first to the judgment of the nation.

Perhaps the fact of the Chartist agitation, so vehement, aggressive, and unpopular—whatever justification may have been seen for it at the time—contributed as much as anything else to make the League studiously cautious and prudent in its proceedings. This was a chief distinction of the movement throughout, and there is scarcely an instance of a League meeting which was rendered disorderly by the conduct of the conveners or the interference of the authorities.

Ebenezer Elliott, who had been delighted to welcome such strong allies in the battle which he had been fighting for more than eight years, took an active part in the new campaign, and in particular he resented the intervention of the Chartists, and the appeals which they had made to the working-men of the towns, by which some of his “plundered fellow-townsmen” in Sheffield had been misled into violence. He printed an address in September 1839, in which he dwelt on the uselessness of violent methods, and the necessity of agreement between the artizan and other classes of the community. “You could not,” he said, “if you were unanimous (which you are not), carry by physical or moral force, or any means whatever, any great public object, without the assistance of some of the other productive classes. The children of the Sunday Schools, who walked through our streets in procession last Whit-Monday, were then better prepared and able to contend with the military than you were. If you were this day arrayed for fight with all your present means, be they what they may, a troop of soldiers’ wives from the barracks, if they made their appearance unarmed, and with or without their husbands’ cloaks over their shoulders, would scare you out of the parish. And the adult daughters of the other productive classes (because they have surplus funds, which you have not, and cannot have, until you get rid of

the Corn Laws) could, if need were, not by coming behind folks, as some of your leaders advise you to do, but in fair battle, and without the aid of a single policeman or soldier, defeat and exterminate you." After thus taunting the advocates of physical force, the Corn Law Rhymer went on:—"You will soon, I venture to hope, see the folly of allowing yourselves to be led the wrong way by paid agents of the scoundrel Bread-taxry, who, favoured by your ignorance, have contrived to place themselves at the head of the Chartists, not merely to defeat the other wise and holy movement, but, by so doing, to sustain the all-beggaring food monopoly, and make the Liberal cause hateful and ridiculous."\*

In spite of all arguments, written or spoken, of course the supporters of the League were for a long time left in a small minority. In April 1839 the central council began to print the "Anti-Corn Law Circular," a trenchant and serviceable weapon in their hands for years to come, which was always managed with vigour, and which made large numbers of converts. By the end of the first year of the League's existence its influence had been widely extended over the country, and the many meetings promoted by it were successful in swelling the ranks of the abolitionists. In January 1840 the council resolved to make a demonstration in Manchester, and the applications for admission were so numerous that a large pavilion was erected in Peter Street capable of holding four thousand persons. A banquet was given in the pavilion on the 13th, and two days later a mass meeting was held there, which was addressed by Mr. Villiers, Mr. Brotherton, Sir William Molesworth, Daniel O'Connell, James Clay, all members of Parliament, as well as by Cobden and others connected with the League. This was the first formal and public association of Mr. Villiers with the new organisation, though, as we

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\* Irving.

have seen, he had already identified himself with the agitation in the House of Commons. On the next day a third meeting was held, at which some five thousand deputies from the various branches of the League were present.

The relations of the League with the Whig Government, then in office, were very slight and cool. Though Lord John Russell, who led the House of Commons, had expressed himself in favourable terms in regard to the general principles of Free Trade, and though some other members of the Ministry were known to share his views on the subject, Mr. Cobden and his friends took nothing by their appeal to the Government of the day. On the 24th of March 1840, two hundred delegates met by appointment in London, and sought interviews with the principal Ministers and Opposition leaders. After they had explained their ideas to Lord Melbourne, the Premier—then in the height of his unpopularity—and having declared their object to be the abolition of the Corn Laws, Lord Melbourne curtly replied, “You know that to be impracticable.” Mr. Ashworth,\* who mentions this fact, adds that the coldness of their reception “caused considerable indignation amongst those who were present.” The replies of Sir Robert Peel, Sir James Graham, and other prominent men on both sides, were scarcely more satisfactory; and the mission of the delegates in London was brought to an end by the passing of a resolution in favour of the unconditional repeal of the taxes on food, and by the adoption of a policy independent of both political parties. It was determined that the League should take part in Parliamentary elections only for the purpose of assisting candidates pledged to vote for repeal.

Some fourteen months before the date last mentioned, Lord John Russell, addressing his constituents at Stroud,

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\* *Recollections of Richard Cobden, &c.*

had declared that, in his opinion, a moderate fixed duty on imports would be more advantageous, not only to trade and manufactures, but also to agriculture, than the fluctuating scale then in existence. "It is desirable," he said, "not to alter too frequently the laws by which the direction of capital and the channels of industry are regulated; but it is also desirable not to maintain a system of duties which, as experience has shown, increases the high prices of dear years to the consumer, and depresses the low prices of cheap years to the producer."

Lord John Russell described this as his individual opinion; and as a matter of fact he was in advance of most of his colleagues. The Premier was indifferent or sarcastic on the subject. Like many others of his party, he admitted the principle, but denied the practicability of the proposed change. Nations, he said to the deputation which had waited on him, must act together, and it would never do for us to give everything first, and then ask for compensations. The Chancellor of the Exchequer at this time was Mr. Baring, and he seems to have been impressed by the arguments of the reformers, and perhaps in a special degree by the evidence and report of Mr. Hume's Select Committee on Import Duties, which met in the session of 1840, and threw much light on the whole matter.

It would have been impossible for any candid mind to remain unaffected by all that was being done to spread information and to produce conviction, and accordingly we find that in 1841 the question had made a considerable advance, and had even been adopted by the Whig Ministry as a battle-ground whereon to meet their opponents in Parliament. The Whigs had long been declining in popularity, and they may have thought that a gradual and cautious acceptance of the Free Trade programme would revive the enthusiasm of the country in their behalf, and enable them to appeal with more confidence to the con-

stituencies when their term of office expired, or when they saw fit to dissolve. However this may have been, early in the session of 1841 the leader of the House of Commons gave notice that on the 30th of May he would ask the House to go into Committee in order to consider the Acts relating to the trade in corn. This might mean much or little. There was a great deal of doubt and excitement on the question, and the Government—now fairly unanimous in their new policy—thought it best to explain their intentions in the matter. They had come to the resolution to propose a fixed duty on corn of eight shillings a quarter, in lieu of the sliding-scale, with corresponding smaller duties on other grains. Lord Melbourne himself, commenting on certain petitions which had been presented against any alteration in the law, declared that he was in favour of a change, having seen reasons to modify his former opinion, “grounded as that opinion was on purely temporary interests.”

The Cabinet did not limit itself to this declaration on the subject of the Corn Laws. It moulded its whole financial policy on Free Trade principles, or, at any rate, upon principles of greater latitude than those which it had hitherto professed. On the 30th of April Mr. Baring introduced his Budget. He had a deficiency to meet of nearly two millions and a half, and in order to provide for this he suggested the simple expedient of diminishing the import duties on sugar and timber. The existing system encouraged colonial trade by imposing heavy duties on foreign goods—one of the effects of which had been that timber cut in European countries had been shipped all the way to Canada, and back again to England, actually realising a profit by selling it in our markets as colonial produce. The duty on colonial timber was only ten shillings a load, whilst that on foreign timber was fifty-five shillings a load. Mr. Baring proposed to double the former duty,



and reduce the duty on Baltic timber to fifty shillings. The duty on colonial sugar was 24s., and on foreign sugar 63s. It was proposed to leave the former as it was, and to reduce the duty on foreign sugar to 36s. From these two changes Mr. Baring anticipated a gain to the revenue of as much as £1,300,000, though the aggregate duties were reduced.

There was a great outcry from the Opposition, and from all who were interested in colonial trade. Issue was at once joined with the Government, and on the 7th of May a debate took place on Lord Sandon's motion, that, "considering the efforts and sacrifices which Parliament and the country have made for the abolition of the slave trade and of slavery," the house was "not prepared (especially with the present prospects of the supply of sugar from the British possessions) to adopt the measures proposed by Her Majesty's Government for the reduction of the duty on foreign sugars."

The debate extended over no fewer than eight nights, during which the question of Free Trade and Protection was very fully discussed. The Government were plainly accused of having taken up the doctrines of the agitators for mere purposes of party. In the result, Ministers were beaten by a majority of 36 in a House of 598. About a fortnight later Sir Robert Peel carried a motion of censure on the Government by a majority of one; and Ministers who, according to Lord John Russell, had already determined to abide by the consequence of their defeat on the Budget, announced a dissolution.

The effect of this struggle in Parliament, and of the struggle which succeeded it in the country, was very great. From this time forward the economical questions of the day were the leading issue both in and out of the House of Commons. The battle was no longer to be fought merely on the platform and in the columns of newspapers; it was to

be an official strife, and was to be decided within the walls of Parliament. The outgoing Government were to figure in Opposition as the champions of the principles which they had adopted, whilst Protection was no longer to be defended by a Liberal Ministry, but only by Tory occupants of the Treasury bench.

Nevertheless, the result of the election was apparently disastrous to the advocates of Free Trade, as it was overwhelmingly disastrous to the Whigs. There was a majority of 91 against the dissolving Ministry, and in favour of the policy of Sir Robert Peel. Prominent supporters of Free Trade like Lords Howick and Morpeth lost their seats, and though Cobden was elected for the borough of Stockport many of his friends were rejected. It is to be remembered that the electors were simply the ten-pound householders in boroughs, and the freeholders in counties. The mass of the people who had been converted by the Anti-Corn Law League were not possessed of the franchise, and the sound doctrines of economical reform still needed a long and untiring advocacy in order to ensure their acceptance.

Sir Robert Peel's attitude on this occasion has often been criticised and called in question. The spirit of his candidature in 1841 is sufficiently manifest from his address to the electors of Tamworth, in which he declared that his party, which it had been his "object in political life" to form, and which had "paid him the compliment of taking his advice and counsel," was a united party. "No difference of principle," he said, "prevails as to the course which we ought to pursue. So far as the Corn Laws are concerned, I cannot consent to substitute a fixed duty of 8s. per quarter for the present ascending and descending scale. The proposition of buying corn in the cheapest market is certainly tempting in theory; but before you determine that it is just, you must ascertain the amount of the burdens to which land in other countries is subjected, and compare them with

the burdens imposed upon land in this country. I think a prudent statesman would pause before he subverted the principle on which protection is given to agriculture in this country."\*

Lord John Russell, returning thanks for his election in the City, admitted the defeat of his party, but declared his belief that the truth of their principles would prevail over the vast majority of the Tories. "Returned to office, they may adopt our measures and submit to the influence of reason, or, if they refuse to do so, they will be obliged to relinquish power; and the monopoly of trade will share the fate of religious intolerance and political exclusion." This was a remarkable prophecy, destined to be fulfilled in an extraordinary manner. Nothing seemed so unlikely in 1841 as the adoption by Sir Robert Peel of the measures proposed by Lord John Russell and his friends a few months before. It was at any rate manifest that the victorious party—the great majority of them coming from the English counties—were enthusiastic advocates of Protection, and that the leader and creator of this party was pledged to maintain the standard around which his followers had rallied.

We have now come to the end of the first stage in the history of the Anti-Corn Law League, distinctly marked by the modification of opinion amongst the official Whigs, and by the election of Mr. Cobden to the House of Commons. Other significant victories of Free Trade advocates were those of Dr. Bowring (one of the earliest members of the League) at Bolton, Mr. Mark Philips and Mr. Milner Gibson (a recent convert from Conservatism) at Manchester, and Mr. Brotherton at Salford. The position taken up by the Leaguers on the hustings had been that which they resolved upon after their fruitless deputation to London,

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\* Irving, June 23, 1841.

they held themselves aloof from party organisations and pledges, resolving to confine themselves to their single object, and to accept its full accomplishment from any party which might offer it. Mr. Ashworth mentions that an impression had prevailed amongst the late Ministerialists that their proposal of an eight shilling fixed duty would find favour with the League, "but the Council disclaimed any compromise with injustice, and issued an address urging their friends not to allow the cause of repeal to be thus weakened." It was the only way to conduct such an agitation, in the face of such opposition, to success.

As Colonel Perronet Thompson had said fifteen years before, in the preface to his *Catechism on the Corn Laws*, "a patient perseverance in keeping the question before the eyes of the community, a moderate but firm protest against any palliative being accepted in lieu of removal, an absolute disavowal of participation in any engagement to consider the subject as at rest, a cheerful confidence that a wrong known is virtually a wrong deceased, however circumstances may retard the moment of its dissolution, a rational degree of co-operation and mutual encouragement, and a pledge for the unceasing employment of all legitimate methods to procure the mitigation and final abolition of the evil"—these were the instruments which effected the prohibition of the Slave Trade, and these would sooner or later effect the abolition of the Corn Laws. "Patience is a virtue; but not that patience which accepts the dereliction of one portion of a wrong as compensation for the eternity of the remainder."

In Lord Beaconsfield's *Endymion* the author has an interesting reference to the Anti-Corn Law agitation. His testimony is especially valuable on the subject of the contrast between the League and the Chartists, whilst it at the same time fairly describes the difficulties of the Government in 1842 :—

“The condition of England at the meeting of Parliament in 1842 was not satisfactory. The depression of trade in the manufacturing districts seemed overwhelming, and continued increasing during the whole of the year. A memorial from Stockport to the Queen in the spring represented that more than half the master spinners had failed, and that no less than three thousand dwelling-houses were untenanted. One-fifth of the population of Leeds were dependant on the poor-rates. The state of Sheffield was not less severe; and the blast furnaces of Wolverhampton were extinguished. There were almost daily meetings at Liverpool, Manchester, and Leeds, to consider the great and increasing distress of the country, and to induce Ministers to bring forward remedial measures; but as these were impossible, violence was soon substituted for passionate appeals to the fears or the humanity of the Government. Vast bodies of the population assembled in Stalybridge and Ashton and Oldham, and marched into Manchester. For a week the rioting was unchecked, but the Government despatched a strong military force to that city, and order was restored.

“The state of affairs in Scotland was not more favourable. There were food riots in several of the Scotch towns, and in Glasgow the multitude assembled, and then commenced what they called a begging tour, but which was really a progress of not disguised intimidation. The economic crisis in Ireland was yet to come, but the whole of that country was absorbed in a harassing and dangerous agitation for the repeal of the union between the two countries.

“During all this time the Anti-Corn Law League was holding regular and frequent meetings at Manchester, at which statements were made distinguished by great eloquence and little scruple. But the able leaders of this confederacy never succeeded in enlisting the sympathies of the great body of the population. Between the masters and the workmen there was an alienation of feeling, which apparently never could be removed. This reserve, however, did not enlist the working classes on the side of the Government; they had their own object, and one which they themselves enthusiastically cherished. And this was the Charter, a political settlement which was to restore the golden age, and which the master manufacturers and the middle classes generally looked upon with even more apprehension than Her Majesty's advisers. It is hardly necessary to add, that in a state like that which is here faintly but still faithfully sketched, the rapid diminution of the revenue was inevitable, and, of course, that decline mainly occurred in the two all-important branches of the Customs and Excise.

“There was another great misfortune, also, which at this trying time hung over England. The country was dejected. The humiliating

disasters of *Afghanistan*, dark narratives of which were periodically arriving, had produced a more depressing effect on the spirit of the country than all the victories and menaces of Napoleon in the heyday of his career. At home and abroad there seemed nothing to sustain the national spirit; financial embarrassment, commercial and manufacturing distress, social and political agitation on the one hand, and on the other the loss of armies, of reputation, perhaps of empire. It was true that these external misfortunes could hardly be attributed to the new Ministry—but when a nation is thoroughly perplexed and dispirited it soon ceases to make distinctions between political parties. The country is out of sorts, and the ‘Government’ is held answerable for the disorder.”





## CHAPTER XL

### THE LITERATURE OF THE LEAGUE.

THE operations of the Anti-Corn Law League were of course not carried on without the expenditure of a large sum of money. Labour, energy, and enthusiasm were not in themselves enough; they were indispensable to the work, but they required to be supplemented; and the necessary resources were not lacking. The first subscription of the founders of the League, when their undertaking began to assume really formidable proportions, amounted to £50,000. Most of this was subscribed in Manchester, and it was spent, as Mr. Ashworth tells us, at the rate of from £6000 to £10,000 a-year up to 1843, "in the pursuit of inquiries into the condition of the country, in the distribution of tracts and serial publications, in the employment of lecturers and the holding of public meetings."

At the time of the General Election in 1841 there was a great increase of enthusiasm in support of the movement, and the Council began to see the fruits of their labours in the better comprehension of the subject throughout the country. Funds began to pour in more generally—not at first from London, or from the south of England, or from the agricultural districts, but mainly from the manufactur-

ing districts of the north-west. Many and peculiar were the methods adopted by the friends of the League in order to swell the amount of its funds. Early in 1842 a bazaar was held in Manchester, which realised something under £10,000, a large proportion of the articles sold having been contributed or collected by the wives and female relatives of the members of the association. Mementos of the League's work, and enforcements of the League's principles, figured in the hall and abounded amongst the articles offered for sale. There were Free Trade handkerchiefs, Anti-Corn Law bread-plates, anti-monopoly pin-cushions, and all that feminine ingenuity could devise to tempt the buyers of trifles who were so much in earnest.

Meanwhile the circulation of tracts and pamphlets had already been enormous, even during the continuance in office of the Whig Ministry. We have seen what the Council of the League had done in the popularisation of the writings of Colonel Thompson and Ebenezer Elliott. They had other pamphlets on their list; they offered prizes for short essays, and published several of these; they reprinted speeches, collections of authorities, long and short extracts from various popular writers. The short tracts alone, excluding mere fly-leaves, made up a volume of over a hundred pages in 1842. All this popular literature was sown broadcast over the country, and yet the leaders were apt to be discouraged by the slowness of their propaganda.

"At one of the League meetings," Mr. Ashworth writes, "when the reports of the stolid ignorance of the people, the obstinacy of the Ministry and of the most influential members on both sides of the House of Commons, had made the Council somewhat dull and sad, Mr. Cobden jumped up and said that they must no longer be contented to dispense simply Free Trade tracts, but they must circulate condensed libraries on the Corn Laws; and instead of raising a subscription of £50,000, he thought they might as



well ask for £100,000 at once. Up to 1843 the sum of £47,814 toward the (second) £50,000 fund had actually been received by the treasurer of the League, and nine millions of tracts, weighing upwards of one hundred tons, and 29,000 copies weekly of the League newspaper, besides other publications, had been issued from the office."

The newspaper here mentioned was the *Anti-Corn Law Circular*, which was conducted with much spirit, and served an excellent purpose in guiding and directing the efforts of the League's members in different parts of the country. It was a treasure of information and argument as long as it continued in existence, and may be read even to this day with the greatest satisfaction. Cobden himself for some time took a prominent part in preparing it for the press; and of course, in so doing, and in the other multifarious duties which he performed, he entirely sacrificed his private prospects as a manufacturer.

There were, at any rate in the first stages of the movement, other tracts and circulars—"Anti-Bread Tax Circulars" and the like—issued by branch associations; but these for the most part ceased when Manchester had finally become the head-quarters and organizing centre. The newspapers were generally unfavourable to, or contemptuous of, the League until they saw that the principles which it advocated were being taken up by statesmen and backed by popular opinion. Almost the only London paper which acknowledged and reported its achievements was the *Sun*, and in this case there was a solid inducement of £500 a-year subscribed by the Council of the League to the proprietors. But eventually the Liberal papers were converted—not by subventions, but by arguments and the logic of facts—and then it was recognised that the agitation had passed through its phase of ridicule.

Whilst we are considering the literature of the Corn Law movement, we must not omit to notice the standing appeal of

the Council to the electors—and it was to the electors almost exclusively that the League addressed its exhortations. Every parcel of tracts, says Mr. Ashworth,\* contained a copy of this appeal, which ran as follows :—

“You are an elector. To you is entrusted the privilege of choosing the law-makers. It is a trust for the good of others; and upon the right or wrong exercise of this trust depends the happiness or misery of millions of your fellow-creatures. At the next Parliamentary election you will be entitled to choose between a bread-taxer (*one who withholds food from the people*) and a candidate who will untax the poor man's loaf. The choice involves an awful responsibility. Think, solemnly and carefully, before you decide. Examine the evidence which is now placed in your hands. Ignorance cannot be pleaded after knowledge has been freely given to you. Remember that you will decide for plenty or scarcity, for comfort or misery, for health or disease, for life or death, to many thousands of immortal beings. Remember, above all, that your decision will be recorded on high, and that you will be called to account for your vote at that dread tribunal, when all mankind will be judged—not by their professions, not by their prayers, but when the blessed will be told, ‘I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat.’”

The religious tone of this appeal, and some of the publications of the League, bears witness to the peculiar earnestness and solemnity of its guiding spirits, and does much to explain the strong hold which they gained over the more sober classes in the country generally. It may be mentioned that the sect of the Quakers, amongst other nonconformist and dissenting bodies, was practically unanimous in its early and steady adhesion to the principles of the League.

Amongst the most telling of the tracts above mentioned was one containing extracts from speeches of Earl Fitzwilliam, who (with Lord Clarendon, Lord Lansdowne, Lord Radnor, and other eminent members of the Upper House) had boldly come forward to sanction the Free Trade move-

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\* *Recollections, &c.*, p. 78.

ment, when to do so involved them in no little odium and unpopularity. Lord Fitzwilliam took the trouble to collect statistics showing the wages of agricultural labourers during the month of May, for more than thirty years, with the price of corn at the same time; and the result was to prove that, deducting from these wages the cost of a given quantity of wheat, sufficient for the average maintenance of a man, the balance was in almost every case greater when corn was at its cheapest. Now it was a common fallacy of the Protectionists—who took as their authority a conditional observation of Adam Smith—that there was most prosperity and highest wages at a time when food was dearest. Lord Fitzwilliam's figures very neatly and completely disproved this statement so far as it applied to the cost of corn under the system of Protection.

Another tract contained materials for discussion and inference drawn from the report of Joseph Hume's committee, mentioned in a previous chapter, which had been appointed "to inquire into the several duties levied upon imports into the United Kingdom, and how far those duties are for protection to similar articles, the produce of this country or of the British possessions abroad, or whether the duties are for revenue alone." Of the value of this inquiry, and of the report issued by Hume and his colleagues, Mr. Mongredien says:—"Whatever may have been the motives under the influence of which Mr. Hume's committee of inquiry was allowed, its appointment led to most important though slowly-developed results. It elicited from numerous experts, and, among others, from such men as Macgregor, G. R. Porter (the able author of the *Progress of the Nation*) and J. Deacon Hume, who had for forty-nine years been engaged at the Customs and at the Board of Trade, evidence utterly condemnatory of the prevailing system.

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\* *Free Trade*, in "Cassell's Shilling Library."

That evidence went to show that while revenue duties give to Government what they take from the public, protective duties give what they take from the public to a limited number of private traders, and by so doing, divert capital and labour from remunerative to wasteful employment. It is difficult to over-estimate the result accruing from the labours of this Import Duties Committee. Their report at first attracted but little attention, but they were so striking, the reasoning so cogent, and the inferences so significant, that soon thoughtful and conscientious statesmen received from it fresh lights which largely modified their previous opinion. Its influence was perceptible in some degree in the Whig Budget of 1841, but was recognisable to a far greater extent in the fiscal improvements introduced soon afterwards by Sir Robert Peel. It was the first semi-official adoption of Free Trade principles, and was somewhat the less obnoxious to the landowners as it bore on the entire range of protected articles, and did not direct any separate or special attack on the Corn Laws." As a budget of trustworthy facts and statistics, Hume's report was of course very valuable for the purposes of the Anti-Corn Law League.

Other tracts were written by, or contained extracts from the works of, Mrs. Loudoun, Mr. W. R. Greg, the Rev. Baptist Noel, and others; whilst the brief "authorities," gathered from writers new and old, were both numerous and effective. Amongst these fragmentary quotations was one from the American statesman, Benjamin Franklin, who said, "Wherever commerce is known to be always free, and the merchant absolute master of his commodity, there will always be a reasonable supply of corn." In some instances the League fortified itself by the admissions of its opponents, or of writers more frequently quoted in support of Protection. Thus, Ricardo had admitted that "all classes, except the landlords, will be injured by the increase in the price of corn." An article in the *Times* had

described the Corn Law as "an extension of the pension list to the whole of the aristocracy of Great Britain." Lord Stanley, "heckled" during the election of 1841 by Mr. John Brooks, a member of the League, had confessed that the Corn Laws increased the price of corn, and consequently the rents of the landlords, whilst the wages of the labourers were not simultaneously increased.

Mr. Ashworth quotes a passage from a reply sent by Carlyle to an invitation to a banquet in the year 1843. "As for the Corn Laws," wrote Carlyle, "my opinion, any time these ten years, has been complete; and even, so to speak, *more* than complete. For these ten years I have heard no argument, or shadow of an argument, in behalf of them which was not of a kind (too literally) 'to make the angels weep.' I consider that if there is a pernicious, portentous, practical solecism, threatening huge ruin under the sun at present, it is that of Corn Laws in such an England as ours of the year 1843. I consider that the Corn Laws lie on the threshold of all and every important improvement in our anomalous, distressed, and distressing condition of society; that they fatally block up all possibility of the innumerable improvements which are fast becoming indispensable, if England is to continue to exist. That it is the duty of all English citizens to do whatsoever is practical for the removal of those laws. That they will have to be removed, unless this universe and its eternal laws are a chimera. That God declares against them, audibly to all just hearts; and that man is now fast declaring—that all men cannot too soon declare—how much lies beyond the Corn Laws, desperately calling for revision, for reformation, among us; and till the Corn Laws are removed, the problem cannot so much as begin."

This was not the only occasion on which Carlyle lent his powerful aid to the cause of the Free Traders.



## CHAPTER XII.

### THE QUESTION IN PARLIAMENT.

**T**HE Parliament of 1841 did not meet until the 19th of August, and after that some time was occupied in discussing the Queen's Speech and handing over the seals of office from the Melbourne Cabinet to the Cabinet of Sir Robert Peel. September was well advanced before the new Government was in a position to use its initiative. Little, therefore, was done for the country in this brief autumn session, which terminated on the 7th of October. But the debates which actually occurred were sufficient to show the attitude and temper of the various sections in the House.

A four nights' debate took place on Mr. Stuart Wortley's amendment to the Address, the discussion turning mainly on the condition of the country, and on the dispositions of Lord Melbourne's Government to relieve it. In this connection, the Queen's Speech, after referring to the unsatisfactory state of the national finances, had said :—"It will be for you to consider whether some of these duties (import duties on foreign goods) are not so trifling in amount as to be unproductive to the revenue, while they are vexatious to commerce. You may further examine whether the

principle of Protection, upon which others of these duties are founded, be not carried to an extent injurious alike to the income of the State and the interests of the people. Her Majesty is desirous that you should consider the laws which regulate the trade in corn. It will be for you to determine whether these laws do not aggravate the natural fluctuation of supply, whether they do not embarrass trade, derange the currency, and by their operation diminish the comfort and increase the privation of the great body of the community." The debate resulted in the defeat of the Ministry by 91 votes; and thus the Whigs were not permitted to show the country what they would have done to satisfy its demands.

Sir Robert Peel invited the Duke of Wellington to enter his cabinet without holding office. His Chancellor of the Exchequer was Mr. Goulburn, his Home Secretary was Sir James Graham, and other posts were held by the Duke of Buckingham, the Earl of Aberdeen, and Lord Stanley. Mr. Gladstone accepted the position of Vice-President of the Board of Trade, under Lord Ripon, and, on seeking re-election for the borough of Newark, he expressed a conviction that the farmers might rely upon "adequate protection" for their interests, and upon the maintenance of the sliding-scale of import duties.

No doubt this was the basis on which Sir Robert Peel originally intended his commercial policy—so far as the corn tax was concerned—to rest. He was in no sense prepared to abandon the Corn Laws altogether, or to abolish the sliding-scale, or to accept the principles of Mr. Cobden and the League; but, on the other hand, he came into office resolved to make as great abatements in the tax as he might find practicable. And he took the earliest opportunity of giving his friends to understand this. In his first speech after the General Election he warned his supporters of the necessity of a change of some kind. "If

you ask me," he said, "whether I bind myself to the maintenance of the existing law in its details, or if you say that this is the condition on which the agricultural interest give me their support, I say that on that condition I will not accept their support." It was argued by some of the more fanatical Protectionists that it was too late for Sir Robert to repudiate the support of those who had elected him, in full confidence that he would refuse every compromise; but the Premier was able to reply that he had never given warrant for this extreme belief, and that he could not, consistently with his duty as a statesman, have pledged himself to such a course.

There was great discontent with the Government when it prorogued Parliament in 1841, without having passed any adequate measure for the relief of the popular distress; but Sir Robert Peel had claimed time for the due consideration of the interests committed to his charge. The anxiety to know how far he would have the courage to go in his promised reform was extreme. The increasing gravity of the situation during the later months of 1841 made many converts to the principles of the League, and when Parliament reassembled in 1842, in the first week of February, the declaration of the Premier was awaited with the utmost curiosity. The Queen opened the Session in person; and, after noting with regret the distress in the manufacturing districts, and acknowledging the "exemplary patience and fortitude" with which the people had borne their sufferings, Her Majesty invited Parliament to consider the laws "which affect the importation of corn and other articles."

On the 9th of February the Premier announced his intentions. He maintained the sliding-scale, as had been anticipated; but he made the duty on imported corn very considerably lighter diminishing it at the various stages by more than one-half. We have quoted in a previous chapter the rates of duty on corn which had been in force for four



years past. The following changes were now proposed. "When corn"—Sir Robert Peel said—"is at 59s. per quarter and under 60s. the duty at present is 27s. 8d.; when it is between those prices, the duty I propose is 13s. When the price of corn is at 50s., the existing duty is 36s. 8d., increasing as the price falls; instead of which I propose when corn is at 50s. that the duty shall only be 20s., and that that duty shall in no case be exceeded. At 56s. the existing duty is 30s. 8d.; the duty I propose at that price is 16s. At 60s. the existing duty is 26s. 8d.; the duty I propose at that price is 12s. At 63s. the existing duty is 23s. 8d.; the duty I propose is 9s. At 64s. the existing duty is 22s. 8d.; the duty I propose is 8s. At 70s. the existing duty is 10s. 8d.; the duty I propose is 5s. Therefore it is impossible to deny, on comparing the duty I propose with that which exists at present, that it will cause a very considerable decrease of the protection which the present duty affords to the home grower."

Little as this proposal was likely to satisfy the country at large, it was certain to give considerable offence to the champions of Protection, and the Premier did what he could to soften the blow to them. He denied in his speech the assertion that the distress in the country was due to the restrictions on imports; he affirmed that the home production of corn was excessive; he declared that the abolition of the Corn Laws would only add agricultural to commercial suffering; and he even asked from the landlords and farmers a dispassionate and moderate discussion of the question, on the ground that there was "universal calm" in the country, and an absence of anything like popular violence.

It was true enough that there was no violence amongst the advocates of Free Trade, or amongst the starving people to whom Mr. Cobden and his friends had been appealing and lecturing for years past. But the "calm" of which Sir Robert spoke was curiously illustrated by the crowds of

eager people who at that moment filled and surrounded the House of Commons, and who had saluted him on his way from Whitehall to Palace Yard with cries of "No Bread Tax!" The statement was significantly commented on by Cobden himself, who in the course of the debate condemned the new scheme as "an insult to a suffering people," who "deserved very different treatment" from the aristocracy and the Cabinet which represented it.

A Conference of Anti-Corn Law delegates was held in London at this time, more than seven hundred being assembled; and they immediately protested against the proposal of the Government as "a denial of the just demands of the people, and a selfish and unrighteous proposal, destructive of every interest in the country."\* The League took occasion to make its dissatisfaction widely known, and to proclaim its resolution to refuse the offered compromise. Large meetings were held in various parts of the country, and the agitation was thenceforth carried on with greater vigour than ever.

The debate was renewed on the 14th of February by a motion of Lord John Russell on going into Committee, to the effect that the House, "considering the evils which have been caused by the present Corn Laws, and especially by the fluctuation of the graduated or sliding-scale, is not prepared to adopt the measure of Her Majesty's Government, which is founded on the same principles, and is likely to be attended by similar results." After the mover had spoken, Mr. Gladstone followed on the Government side, claiming credit for what had been done under the circumstances in the interest of the people at large, and after consideration of the various conditions of the case. On the next evening Lord Palmerston took part in the debate, and was even stronger and more rhetorical than Lord John Russell in

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\* Ashworth, *Recollections*, p. 47.

favour of the policy which they had adopted. He spoke of the dependence of men upon each other, and of the natural means of intercommunication provided between distant countries. The reason, he said, for this dispensation of Providence is, "that the exchange of commodities may be accompanied by the extension and diffusion of knowledge, by the interchange of mutual benefits, engendering mutual kind feelings, multiplying and confirming friendly relations. It is that commerce may freely go forth, leading civilisation with one hand and peace with the other, to render mankind happier, wiser, better. This is the dispensation of Providence, this is the decree of that Power which created and disposed the universe. But, in the face of it, with arrogant, presumptuous folly, the dealers in restrictive duties fly, fettering the inborn energies of man, and setting up their miserable legislation instead of the great standing laws of nature."

The Opposition leaders were open to the retort that the same arguments which they now alleged against Ministers were applicable a short time ago to themselves. That is a very common retort in Parliamentary life, and in all such cases it is possible for the accused to pride themselves on the fact of prior conversion. Lord John Russell's motion was rejected by a majority of 349 against 226.

Cobden meanwhile had reserved himself for the more direct motion for total repeal which Mr. Villiers intended to bring forward. Less support was to be expected for this than for the former motion, but of course it was more congenial to the spokesman of the League. Five nights were occupied in this renewed debate, wherein the leading men on both sides, especially those who had not spoken on Lord John Russell's motion, took part. It was on this occasion, and on the concluding night (Feb. 24th), that Cobden made his first important speech in the House of Commons. He was not ill received by his colleagues as a body, though he

had to face plenty of ridicule and prejudice, and though here and there a member, like the irrepressible Mr. Ferrand of Knaresborough, resorted to the imputation of unworthy motives.

One passage in this speech is specially worthy of attention, because it brought the advocate of total abolition into momentary conflict with Sir Robert Peel; and because the conflict, slight as it was, showed how much better armed was the new debater, with his telling facts and unanswerable arguments, than the old and practised Parliamentary leader. Cobden had been referring to the proposal of a private member to fix the prices of all the principal articles of agricultural produce;\* and he said, "It may be very amusing to find that there are a few gentlemen still at large who advocate the principle of Parliamentary interposition to fix the prices at which articles are to be sold; but when we find a Prime Minister coming down to Parliament to avow such principles, it really becomes anything but amusing. I ask the right honourable baronet, and I pause for a reply—is he prepared to carry out that principle in the articles of cotton and wool as well as corn?" The Premier here admitted that it was impossible to fix the price of food by legislation. "Then," rejoined Cobden, "on what are we legislating? . . . We come to this conclusion, that we are not legislating for the universal people!"

Loud cheers on both sides attested the interest with which this discussion was being watched. Mr. Cobden continued:—"I ask the right honourable baronet whether, while he fixes his scale of prices to secure to his landowners fifty-six shillings per quarter for wheat, he has any sliding-scale for wages? Will he give the people a law to keep up the rate of wages? He will say that you have passed resolutions to the effect that you cannot keep up the rate of

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\* Ashworth, *Recollections*, p. 48.

wages ; but that is no reason why you should pass a law to mulct the working-man by one-third of the loaf he earns. What are the pretexts upon which the corn tax is justified ? We have heard that there are exclusive burdens borne by the agriculturists. I think the country has a right to know what they are, and that it is due to the House that they should be enumerated. A witty gentleman who sits near me says the only exclusive burdens upon land which he knows of are mortgages. I tell the right honourable gentleman that for every particular burden he can show me as pressing upon the land, I will show him ten exemptions. In conclusion, what I supplicate for on the part of the starving people is that they, and not you, shall be the judges of their need of corn ; that they, and not you, shall say when it is wanted. You, who never knew the want of a meal in your lives, do you presume to know when the people want bread ? The right honourable gentleman is the cause of our present position, and upon his shoulders will the people lay the whole of the responsibility. . . . Are you," Mr. Cobden appealed to the House in conclusion, "prepared to carry out even-handed justice to the people ? If not, your law will not stand—nay, your House itself, if based upon injustice, will not stand !"

This was a fervent, plain-spoken address, which showed its hearers that their new colleague was no mere demagogue, as some of them had imagined, seeking to establish the influence of the platform over the House of Commons. Cobden's vigour, as Mr. Mongredien says, though it provoked the wrath, commanded the attention of his opponents. "They might impugn his statements, and scoff at his inferences, but none could ignore the raciness and terse lucidity of his style. His address excited uproarious dissent, but it established his reputation as a Parliamentary debater, and secured to him for ever the ear of the House."

The Premier was able to give his response to this appeal

on the 11th of March, when he explained the financial policy of the Government in a long and very important speech. He had to admit a deficit of two millions and three-quarters, and an estimated deficit for the following year of nearly two millions and a-half. New Customs and Excise duties had ceased to be productive at anything like their nominal rate; an extra duty of five per cent. on the general tariff had only realised one-twentieth of that amount. He proposed, therefore, to take a new departure, and, in order to enable himself to simplify the tariff, he asked the House to assent to a duty on incomes, which (at sevenpence in the pound) would yield £3,700,000. Fresh stamp and spirit duties would give him £410,000 more, and an export duty of 4s. a ton on coals would produce a further sum of £200,000. In this way he anticipated a surplus of £1,740,000, whereof he proposed to apply £1,200,000 to a reduction of the tariff.

Describing this important Budget to the House of Commons, Sir Robert Peel claimed for the Government that they had attempted to remove all absolute prohibitions on the importation of foreign articles, and to reduce prohibitory duties to such a scale as would enable foreign producers to compete with Englishmen in English markets. "There are instances," he admitted, "in which that principle has been departed from, and where prohibitions are maintained, and in those cases we justify departure from the rule upon special circumstances; but the general rule has been to abolish prohibitions, and reduce prohibitory duties within the range of fair competition. Our object has been to reduce the duties on raw materials, which constitute the elements of manufactures, to an almost nominal amount, to reduce the duties on half-manufactured articles, which enter almost as much as raw materials into domestic manufactures, to a nominal amount; and with reference to articles completely manufactured, our object has been to remove prohibitions and reduce prohibitory duties, so as to enable the

foreign producer to compete fairly with the domestic manufacturer."

There was evidently system and deliberation in this scheme, which was undoubtedly a concession to the manufacturing interests, and was intended to benefit them even at the expense of the owners of large incomes. The reductions of duty were very numerous. There were at that time no fewer than 1200 imported articles liable to the payment of a duty, and the tax was reduced on 750 of these. But at the same time there were many harassing restrictions which remained untouched, and the principle of Protection was tenaciously clung to. Mr. Cobden and his friends refused to compromise their demands, and Sir Robert Peel had not expected that they would do so. He had answered them beforehand in the last words of his exhaustive speech:—"I know," he said, "that many gentlemen who are strong advocates for Free Trade may consider that I have not gone far enough. I believe that on the general principle of Free Trade there is now no great difference of opinion, and that all agree in the general rule that we should purchase in the cheapest market and sell in the dearest."

At this there was naturally a loud cheer from the Opposition benches. But Sir Robert continued:—"I know the meaning of that cheer. . . . I may be met with the complaints of gentlemen opposite of the limited extent to which I have applied the general principle to which I have adverted to those important articles. I thought, after the best consideration I could give to the subject, that if I proposed a greater change in the Corn Laws than that which I submitted to the consideration of the House, I should only aggravate the distress of the country, and only increase the alarm which prevailed among important interests. I think that I have proposed, and that the legislature has sanctioned, as great a change in the Corn Laws as was just or

prudent, considering the engagements existing between landlord and tenant, and also the large amount of capital which has been applied to the cultivation of the soil. Under these circumstances, I think that we have made as great a change as was consistent with the nature of the subject."

The Premier's explanation was clear and significant enough. He would have gone much further if the agricultural interests—that is the landlords—had permitted him. He was practically a Free Trader already, as were some of his colleagues; but he was obliged to proceed with great caution lest he might offend his weak-kneed brethren. Already the Duke of Buckingham had left the Cabinet because he would not sanction this modification of the tariff. Others were wavering, and there were many signs in the House that the Tory rank and file were alarmed by their leader's liberality. Sir Robert was not prepared to go further for the present, though he was prepared to do so if he saw a favourable opportunity. All this was readable between the lines of the Premier's speech.

The financial and commercial proposals of the Government were carried by large majorities, though they were opposed at various stages and on various grounds. On the third reading of the Tariff Bill, Mr. Cobden moved an amendment to the effect that it was beyond the power of Parliament to regulate the wages of labour, and that it was consequently inexpedient and unjust to pass a law to regulate the prices of food. The amendment was negatived, and the Bill passed, as also did the Corn Law Amendment Bill, and the Income Tax Bill. The duties on corn were finally simplified in such a manner that whilst one shilling a quarter was charged, as before, when the price of wheat was 73s. or over, the tax rose to 2s. at an average price of 72s., to 10s. at an average price of 63s. or under, and to 20s. at an average price of 50s. or under.



Such, then, were the measures passed in the first year of office by the Government which was afterwards to establish Free Trade without reservation. They gave temporary satisfaction to the moderate sections of both parties; but they were bitterly opposed by the champions of the landed interests, whilst they were rejected as entirely inadequate by the opponents of all restriction. Macaulay, during the debate on Mr. Villiers's annual motion, had described the Corn Bill as "a measure which unsettles everything and settles nothing; a measure which pleases nobody; a measure which nobody asks for, and which nobody thanks him for; a measure which will neither extend trade nor relieve distress." This was a rhetorical way of putting it, but in substance the judgment was true. Neither side in the controversy was pleased, and the controversy itself was not settled. The Premier earned no gratitude, and the effects of his measure were comparatively slight. The popular distress was not relieved, and it soon became necessary to advance much further. But a step had been taken in the right direction, the tariff had been greatly reduced, and a basis had been laid down for future operations.





## CHAPTER XIII.

### PROGRESS OF THE AGITATION (1842).

THE Parliamentary campaign of 1842 confirmed the leaders of the Free Trade movement, and of the Anti-Corn Law League in particular, in the belief that agitation and popular enlightenment were more than ever necessary. There was encouragement in the attitude assumed by the Government, if not in the obstinacy of the Conservative majority. Sir Robert Peel and his Cabinet had shown themselves capable of receiving an impression from logical arguments, and of acting upon it in a candid manner. If they had not gone so far as the occasion seemed to demand, Mr. Cobden and his friends drew the inference that the impression must be made yet more deep, and that the weight of demonstration must be accumulated until it should be no longer possible for Ministers of the Crown to refuse a full concession of the principles involved. It was now, therefore, that the League determined to make more active exertions than ever, to strengthen its organisation, to increase its funds, and never to rest until the Corn Laws had been finally swept away.

Before the end of the session of 1842 the deputies of the

Association met again in London, and had repeated interviews with Ministers, as well as with other influential members of the House of Commons. Their object was to press on the attention of the Legislature the terrible gravity of the situation throughout the country, and especially in the manufacturing districts of the north. The League had collected a vast amount of information on this subject, which revealed a state of affairs almost incredible to anyone hearing the details for the first time, though familiar enough in those days to men of observation. Of all the Ministers interviewed, Sir Robert Peel appeared to be most open for discussion, if not to conviction. In some instances the deputies were rather brusquely treated. Mr. Ashworth relates an incident which took place at their interview with Sir James Graham. He had been speaking of the feeling amongst the industrial classes, who complained that whilst they had to endure grievous privations the landlords enjoyed protection by law, with rents greatly increased, and with comforts unknown to and undreamed of by their forefathers. Sir James interrupted him, and exclaimed, "Why, you are a leveller!" Did Mr. Ashworth, he asked, mean that the labouring classes held themselves entitled to some of the landlords' estates? "I, under some emotion," says the narrator, "turned to the deputation, and inquired whether in their opinion I had conveyed any such idea in what I had said? They at once cheered me, and declared that it was utterly impossible that such an impression should have been conveyed in what I had said. Mr. Thomas Ashton appeared indignant at the imputation, and called out, 'Go on, Mr. Ashworth, and never mind him.'"

The Conference of deputies, during their stay in London, issued an appeal to every member of the House of Commons, which compressed into a few sentences the collected information in the hands of the League. This document, which holds a distinct place in the history of the movement, was

dated from the King's Arms Hotel, Palace Yard, June 25th, 1842, and ran as follows :—\*

"SIR,—We, whose names are appended to this document, have been for some days in London seeking interviews with Her Majesty's Ministers, and with members of Parliament of all political parties, that we might communicate to them facts which we deem most important respecting the present very alarming condition of the country, and more particularly of the North of England. We have had opportunities of stating our sentiments to various members, and we have also had an interview with Sir Robert Peel. We propose to lay before you the substance of the statements which we endeavoured to press upon the attention of the Prime Minister, and we respectfully and earnestly request your consideration of the following facts :—In Glasgow 12,000 persons are on the relief funds, and wages are still falling. In Dundee the number of unemployed is increasing, and wages falling. In 1836 Dundee consumed 150 head of cattle per week ; in 1841, 91 head ; and in 1842 only 71 head. In Accrington, out of a population of 9000 persons, not more than 100 are fully employed. In Marsden, near Burnley, out of 5000 persons, 2000 have become paupers, and the remainder are on the verge of pauperism ; the poor-rate is one shilling in the pound per month. In Great Bolton the amount levied in 1827 was £3951, and in 1841 £16,740 ; the rated rental is upon £86,000, and only £36,000 is paying to the poor rates, the remainder being either empty property, or else the occupiers are unable to pay the rates. In Stockport the poor-rate is 10s. in the pound, and the guardians are £5000 in debt. In Wigan many families remain in bed during the day, because they feel hunger less intolerable when in a recumbent position. In Prescot, having 1100 inhabitants, principally employed in watchmaking, there were 200 recently summoned in one day for non-payment of the poor-rate. A watch movement, which a few years ago was selling for 30s., may be bought for 4s. 6d. In Saddleworth, from a survey made in December 1841, there were 55 farms without tenants ; 26 mills were unoccupied, whilst most of the others were working short time ; and matters are still getting worse. In Sheffield the poor-rate of 1836 averaged £162 per quarter ; in 1839, £541 ; and in the June quarter of 1842 it was £4253. In Leeds, with a population of 80,000 persons, there are 10,000 who have been supported from a voluntary relief fund, which is now exhausted. In Nottingham the number of persons receiving parish relief, in 1841,

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\* Ashworth, *Recollections*, p. 55.

was 4453, and in 1842, 7938. In the Midland Counties one-third of the hosiery population are unemployed, and in the glove trade three-fifths are unemployed. Bodies of men, under leadership, parade the town of Leicester asking for alms, and it has been deemed necessary to introduce a troop of horse soldiers to preserve the peace of the place. In Manchester the shopkeepers have stated, at a public meeting, that such is the poverty of the people that their trade has fallen off one-third, and that there are thousands who buy their bread by halfpenny and pennyworths, and that private charity is insufficient to relieve the necessitous. Details such as the foregoing might be increased indefinitely. We have facts of an equally painful character from almost every part of the country. We believe that if the Corn Laws be abolished trade will revive, and the abodes of millions of the wretched will be filled with gratitude and joy. The predictions as to the consequences of delay have already been more than fulfilled. You have passed a new Corn Law this session, and grain has advanced in price since its enactment, and it still rises. You have turned the burden somewhat, but you have not lightened it. We ask you to open the ports for the free admission of foreign grain, and to do this before you separate. Justice, policy, humanity, the very safety of our common country, imperatively require it. In your present course, your motives are doubted; self-aggrandisement, rather than a regard for your country's welfare, is believed to be the object of your legislation. Your names are loaded with obloquy, and harsh terms are applied to you, on account of your unwillingness to liberate the industry of your country. We feel bound to warn you of the evils which impend, if you prefer the unwise policy you have hitherto adopted. We shall hail you as the deliverers of your country if you have the wisdom to see what is right, and the courage to act boldly and immediately on what is wise. Our sense of the critical position of our country has caused us thus to address you. The responsibility rests with you, and a heavy responsibility it is. That the Wisdom which cannot err may guide your councils is our fervent wish.—We subscribe ourselves, with the greatest respect, HAMER STANSFIELD, Leeds; WILLIAM RAWSON, Manchester; WILLIAM ROAFE, Independent Minister, Wigan; JAMES LEES, Saddleworth; CHARLES BAKER, Baptist Minister, Stockport; WILLIAM DIXON, Accrington."

The immediate purpose of the London Conference, which continued its sittings till the end of July, was to convince the Government of the actual and momentary pressure of the distress, the danger of further neglect, which might

result in serious disorders, and the necessity of special legislation before Parliament was prorogued. It was, however, unsuccessful in its efforts. The Ministers personally appealed to were inclined to think that the accounts of popular suffering had been exaggerated, or else that the evils were only temporary, and due to causes over which they could exercise no control. They pointed to the facts that fresh mills were constantly being opened, that the quantity of cotton imported into the country was greater than ever, and that some manufacturers, at all events, were making large fortunes. It was even suggested that much of the suffering might be attributed to want of application, or to unwise agitation; that it was more the business of the employers than of the State to relieve it; that the demands of the people upon Parliament were made in ignorance; that if men were driven to emigrate, it was rather "to invest what money they had in hand" (as Sir Robert Peel expressed it) than to obtain work and food; and that if there were any danger of popular outbreaks, the responsibility would rest upon those who laid bare and exaggerated the distress.

Nothing, therefore, was done or attempted by the Government; and the Conference separated on the eve of the prorogation with a protest against this inaction. The deputies maintained that they had proved "the impolicy and wickedness" of the Corn Laws. They had forced on the attention of Parliament both the causes and the remedy of national distress; they had spread far and wide a mass of facts and arguments on the great principle of industrial freedom, and they felt that their labours had not been in vain. But the time for argument seemed now to have passed. It was for the people to act and insist; to bring pressure upon their representatives; to tell them that "men must live, though party should perish." "Your own intelligence, your own virtue, your own energy," this short address to the people concluded, "must deliver you. We now

separate, but are prepared to reassemble at such time and place as the Council in Manchester may determine. Providence has given plenty. A few men of wealth and title have opposed their mandate to the will of Heaven. Shall mortal man be more just than God?"

No doubt it was going a little too far to say that "a few men of wealth and title" deliberately condemned the people to starvation, which is what the last three sentences imply. Amongst the landowners, possibly, there were some who knew that their rents were maintained by the very laws which made the people suffer, and who yet tenaciously clung to them. These may have deserved the reproach, but it could not be strictly applied to the members of the Government, who, mistaken though they were, honestly believed the Corn Laws to be good for the country, and attributed the distress to a convergence of different causes.

During the recess, the League renewed its campaign with vast energy, sending its lecturers all over the country, and seconding their attempts to educate the people by an unlimited supply of the publications which have already been mentioned and described. A fresh addition to the literature of the League, originally published in the "Circular," was a resolution moved by Mr. John Bright, and seconded by Mr. Ashworth, at a meeting held in Manchester soon after the prorogation. This was probably drawn up by Mr. Bright himself, and was one of his earliest, if not his first, contribution to the written arguments of the Free Trade movement. Mr. Bright moved that the following statement should be circulated throughout the United Kingdom:—

"Whilst wholly disregarding the wicked and calumnious attacks made upon us by the abettors of monopoly, we feel it to be our duty to recall to the calm consideration of all classes the long prevailing evils against which we have unceasingly contended—evils which we solemnly believe have led to the existing commotions, and which, unless removed, will inevitably involve the nation in still greater calamities.

"In the autumn of 1838 the accumulating privations and alarming

prospects of the people impelled a united effort to procure the abolition of the Corn Law.

"In the spring of 1839 a numerous body of delegates assembled in London, and appealed to the House of Commons to be heard at their bar ; but their application was refused.

"In 1840 another delegation assembled in London, to press upon Parliament and the Ministry the necessity of repealing the Corn Law, and this second appeal was likewise rejected.

"In 1841 another and more numerous body of delegates met, and reiterated their facts and arguments, and again the Legislature refused the act of justice demanded of them.

"During the Parliamentary recess between 1841 and 1842 meetings were held in almost every part of the country, amongst which was one of 650 ministers of religion held in Manchester, and another of 800 ministers and office-bearers of Scotch congregations held at Edinburgh, all proclaiming the moral and physical deterioration of the working classes, and the ruinous effects of the Corn Law upon every department of industry.

"In 1842, at the opening of the Parliamentary session, 700 delegates commenced their sittings in the Metropolis. They sought an interview with the Prime Minister, who declined to receive them. They published an appalling statement of the sufferings of the population, and showed the intimate connection between those sufferings and the working of the Corn Law. The Legislature then sanctioned a change in the law, which was entirely worthless, and tantamount to an utter denial of the just claims of the people.

"Subsequently, another delegation assembled in London, and had interviews with the Prime Minister, and with various of his colleagues. They laid before them the state of the country, the impending destruction of some, and the great depression of all trades ; the intense and widespread sufferings of the people ; the exasperation of feeling at the hopelessness of redress which prevailed amongst them, and the danger that some great social convulsion would result from the infatuated resolution of the majority of the Legislature, despite the prayers of millions of petitioners, to maintain at all hazards their destructive monopoly. We have long foreseen, and often foretold, the disastrous effects of the Corn Law, pointed out the chief cause of distress, suggested the remedy, and foretold the consequences of delay ; our duty has therefore been performed, and the responsibility now rests upon the Government and the Legislature.

"Whilst we strongly and unequivocally condemn every breach of the public peace, we desire to express our sympathy with the unmerited



and long-continued sufferings of the working classes, and our belief that the industrious population of this country, if justly governed, would invariably be disposed to conduct themselves as peaceable, honest men, and good citizens.

“Finally, we declare our unshaken conviction that the unjust and inhuman Corn Law is the main cause of the evils which afflict the industrial community, destroying the profits of the manufacturers, reducing the wages of the working-men, and bringing beggary and ruin upon a large portion of our countrymen; and we desire to record our deliberate opinion that the dense and increasing population of this country cannot be in a prosperous, comfortable, or contented condition so long as they are subjected to the pressure of the Corn Law; and that there can be no guarantee for the peace of society, or for the security of life and property, whilst large masses of the people are sinking into a state of abject destitution. We therefore earnestly implore our countrymen of every class to unite with us in urging upon the Government the necessity of immediately reassembling the Legislature with a view to the total abolition of the destructive monopoly in the food of the people.”

The year 1842 was not to pass away without violence; but this violence was due to the agitation of the Chartists, and was nowhere sanctioned by the leaders of the Free Trade movement. The advocates of the Six Points were moved to special activity by the acute popular distress of this year, and they revived the idea of a month's universal strike, which they thought must inevitably force the hands of the Legislature, and compel it to grant the People's Charter without reservation. The “sacred month” began in the second week of August, and a Pilgrimage of Idleness took place through many of the large manufacturing towns of the north, chiefly of Lancashire, which compelled the working-men in the factories and mills to cease work. In some cases the magistrates interfered, and the Riot Act was resorted to in order to disperse crowds from which danger was anticipated to the public peace. Of course the manufacturers were great sufferers by these proceedings; and as it was the manufacturers of Lancashire above all others who

were the leaders and directors of the Free Trade movement, the contrast between their action and the action of the Chartist leaders became more marked than ever. Some of them made earnest appeals to their workmen to abstain from the violent method which they had been persuaded or constrained to adopt ; and Mr. Bright in particular issued a manly address to the working-men of Rochdale, in which he showed them that the immediate attainment of the Charter was impossible, whilst, even if they secured it, they could not hope for a rise of wages until the restrictions on trade had been removed. Mr. Bright sympathised with the objects of the Chartists, he believed that they would one day be secured ; but he told his fellow-townsmen that the first step towards entire freedom must be commercial freedom, the freedom of trade and industry. The aristocracy, he pointed out, looked upon the Anti-Corn Law League as their greatest enemy, and "that which is the greatest enemy of the remorseless aristocracy of Britain must almost of necessity be your firmest friend. Every man who tells you to support the Corn Law is your enemy—every man who hastens, by a single hour, the abolition of the Corn Law, shortens by so much the duration of your sufferings. Whilst that inhuman law exists, your wages must decline. When it is abolished, and not till then, they will rise. If every employer and workman in the kingdom were to swear on their bended knees that wages should not fall, they would still assuredly fall if the Corn Law continues. No power on earth can maintain your wages at their present rate if the Corn Law be not repealed."

The vehement methods were soon exhausted without attaining their object ; the calmer and more logical methods were continued, and with greater promise of success, from day to day. The League was more than ever stimulated by the Chartist outbreak, and strengthened its organisation in every conceivable manner. The country was subdivided

into twelve districts, each of which was taken in hand by a lecturer. By the middle of October two thousand lectures had been delivered, and upwards of five million tracts had been circulated. Meetings had been held in hundreds of places, many of them presided over or attended by ministers of religion, especially of the dissenting bodies. A memorial had been presented to the Queen signed by more than a quarter of a million women of Manchester and the neighbourhood, whilst others of a similar character, though less numerous, signed, had been sent from other towns.\* By this time the second fund of £50,000 had been expended, and the League called for a third subscription of like amount, which was speedily forthcoming—more than £10,000 reaching the central offices in the course of November. In short there was never any period in the eight years' history of the Anti-Corn Law League when greater determination and enthusiasm was displayed by its officers, or by its supporters throughout the country.

It is needless to say that the advocates of Free Trade continued to encounter much prejudice amongst certain classes of their fellow-countrymen, and that persons who were ignorant, wilfully or otherwise, of the true state of affairs persisted in confounding the League with the instigators of public disorder. As Miss Martineau wrote shortly afterwards, the League "had not had time to win the respect and command the deference which it was soon to enjoy ; but it was known to be organised and led by men of station, character and substance, men of enlarged education, and of that virtuous and decorous character which distinguishes the middle class of England." Notwithstanding this, "it was believed—believed by men of education—by men in Parliament—by men in attendance on the Government—that the Anti-Corn Law League sanctioned assassina-

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\* Ashworth, p. 71.

tion, and did not object to carry its aims by means of it. This is, perhaps, the strongest manifestation of the tribulation of the time."

Amidst such a condition of affairs, with the controversy at its height, and the feelings of all public men roused to an extreme pitch of excitement, the year 1842 came to a close.





## CHAPTER XIV.

### THE SESSION OF 1843.

THE first month of the year 1843 was distinguished by several incidents not without interest, and even importance, in the history of the Free Trade movement. One of these was the murder of Mr. Edward Drummond, private secretary to Sir Robert Peel, who was shot in the back by a man named McNaughten, in Whitehall. The murderer declared, when examined, that he had been persecuted by the Tories for years past ; and there is little reason to doubt that he was insane, as he was declared to be by the jury which tried him. He was supposed to have mistaken his victim for the Premier ; but his crime would not have called for mention here if it had not been most absurdly and unjustifiably laid to the charge of the Free Traders, and actually referred to in that connection in both Houses of Parliament.

This stupid accusation was an outcome of the intense jealousy and heat which had been stirred up between the reformers and the champions of the old ideas ; and a ludicrous instance of the same feeling may be quoted by way of contrast. A manufacturer in the North of England, who had just perfected a process for the production of velveteen

cloth, sent a piece to Sir Robert Peel, which was stamped with one of the numerous designs then in vogue, symbolising in some fashion the principles of Free Trade. Sir Robert either had not noticed the design, or he attached no importance to it, for he accepted the gift; but shortly afterwards his attention was drawn to it, and he thought it necessary to return the cloth to the donor. In doing so he wrote that "he was not aware till to-day that the specimen of manufacture bore any allusion to matters which are the subject of public controversy. He begged therefore to return that which had been accepted under an erroneous impression." No little amusement was created by this solemn afterthought; and the letters which passed on the subject came to be described as "the velveteen correspondence." \*

The Parliamentary session was opened on the 2nd of February, and on the 13th Lord Howick moved in the Commons for a Committee of the whole House to consider that part of the Queen's Speech referring to the continued depression of English trade. On the fifth night of the debate which ensued upon this motion, Cobden delivered a speech of great force, which led to a somewhat remarkable scene. After referring to the measures of economical reform already passed by Ministers, and noticing that their principles were sound "in the abstract," he commented on a previous speech of Mr. Gladstone's. "The Vice-President of the Board of Trade," he said, "admits the justice of the principles of Free Trade. He says that he does not want monopoly; but then he applies these just principles only in the abstract. Now, I do not want abstractions. Every moment that we pass here which is not devoted to providing for the welfare of the community is lost time. . . . The right hon. gentleman is a Free-trader only in the abstract. We have nothing, I repeat, to do with abstrac-

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\* Irving, January 7, 1843.

tions here. The right hon. gentleman used another plea. He said that the system has been continued for centuries, and cannot now be abandoned. If the Attorney-General be in the House, and I hope he is, what would he say to such a plea in an action of trover? Would he admit the plea? Would he say, 'I know you have right and justice on your side in the abstract, but then the unjust possession has been for so long a time continued that it cannot be at once abandoned? What would be the verdict in such a case? The verdict would be one of restitution—of total and immediate restitution.'

In the course of his speech Cobden declared that Sir Robert Peel was individually responsible for the present state of things—responsible by virtue of his office, which, however, he had the privilege of being able to resign. Referring to an attempt which had been made in the House of Lords to connect the League with the maniacal act of McNaughten, Cobden described the accusation of Lord Brougham in this connection as "the ebullition of an ill-regulated intellect, rather than the offspring of a malicious spirit."

His speech was well received, and was probably not without effect upon the voting, which left the Free Traders in a less hopeless minority than had been the case in the preceding session. Sir Robert Peel, however, was enthusiastically cheered when, following Cobden, he indignantly commented on the latter's statement that he was personally responsible for the condition of the country. "Be the consequences of the insinuations what they may," he said, "never will I be influenced by menaces such as these to hold language or adopt a course which I consider in the slightest degree inconsistent with my public duty." Cobden rose up in his place and disclaimed the use of the word "personally." "You did—you did!" the Premier exclaimed. "At any rate," he continued, "the hon. gentleman held me individually responsible. He may do so, and he may

induce others to hold me individually responsible; but it shall in no way influence me in the discharge of my public duty."

This incident caused an extraordinary excitement in the country, and especially amongst the members and supporters of the League. The charge against Cobden was not allowed to rest as it had been formulated in Parliament. It was repeated and aggravated by the most injudicious friends of Protection, both in the press and on public platforms. The *Times* newspaper, less measured in its language than it has since become, wrote in the following strain on the morrow of the debate:—"We do not impute to Mr. Cobden an intent to murder; but we do impute to him that with his eyes open, knowing fully the threatening consequence to Sir Robert Peel's life of popular odium, and with no other purpose than to increase his own credit and power with the most violent class of politicians, he feels no scruple at recklessly and unceasingly labouring to direct that odium, personally and individually, on the Minister whose life has been once already attempted. It is difficult to avoid the suspicion that, though he has no intention to use the pistol himself, he does not find himself at liberty to affront those who do. If he is not anxious to put the Premier out of the world, he cannot, by the extreme of charity, be fancied very careful to keep him in it."

But the country as a whole was more just, and Cobden's popularity was greatly increased as the result of the attacks which had been made upon him. A large meeting was held in Manchester for the purpose of expressing sympathy with him, when an address was voted to him by more than ten thousand voices. This address recorded that the League—for the meeting was summoned as a general meeting of the League—had seen with indignation "the attempts made by the monopolists to heap slanders upon the man who has been so powerfully instrumental in denouncing the injustice



of that legislation which has brought this once flourishing country to the verge of ruin." The address continued:—"We can understand that the distinguished position in which you are placed is well calculated to excite the hostility of all who believe themselves interested in the continuance of the wrong which you have done so much to expose. Fortified by the approbation of your own conscience, and by that of a vast majority of your fellow-countrymen who have watched your career with intense and increasing interest, you can well afford to despise the assaults and calumnies of the abettors of monopoly. We bid you go on! Your country and mankind call upon you not to falter in your course; and may He who is the dispenser of all mercies prosper you in your arduous labours."

Mr. Ashworth,\* writing of this large gathering of Free Traders at which he was present, and spoke eloquently on behalf of his friend, says:—"The meeting in Manchester, on the 23rd of February, was called as an 'extraordinary general meeting' of the League, and was certainly one of the most 'extraordinary' meetings ever held in Manchester or the country; the Free Trade Hall being crowded to excess, although calculated to hold more than five thousand persons. The meeting was called 'to repudiate the charges made in the legislature against the League, and more particularly against Richard Cobden, Esq., M.P.' The word 'charges' covered both the personal attack of Sir Robert Peel in the Commons and Lord Brougham's bitter invectives upon the same subject in the Lords." Mr. George Wilson presided, and in the course of his address said:—"I deny all alliance with, and approbation and knowledge of, any agent or means, other than those that are peaceful, moral, and in accordance with the British constitution, for the accomplishment of our object, and I hurl back the

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\* *Recollections, &c.*, p. 87.

calumny as a most atrocious, most wilful, and most audacious falsehood."

Amongst the other speakers at this memorable meeting was Mr. Bright, who had now become a hard-working member of the League, and a frequent speaker on Free Trade questions outside the walls of Parliament. Mr. Bright strongly condemned the attacks which had been made on Cobden, not merely by the Premier, but by Liberals such as Lord Brougham and Mr. Roebuck. "Every man," he said, "must deplore the fact that the Prime Minister of this country should have degraded himself by such an exhibition as that which he made in the House of Commons last week. I rejoice that we have so speedily again an opportunity of meeting in this hall, to denounce the law which the Prime Minister acknowledges to be unjust, and which he knows full well must soon be repealed. Look at the miserable tactics of our opponents from the beginning. We are not at the climax of the game they have been playing. They treated us at first with ridicule. Afterwards they pretended to meet us with a little of argument; and that failed, as it was likely to fail. Then they hinted at the suppression of the League as an illegal association; but though there are laws in this country with meshes so small that it might be possible we should not be able to get through them, yet these laws are laws which no Minister dare enforce, unless he have the sanction of the great body of the intelligent population of this country; and I dare assert that on this question the intelligence of this country, and of the middle classes in particular, is in direct antagonism to the Ministry of the day. This project, then, of suppressing the League as an illegal association did not do, and slander was next resorted to. . . . I confess that I feel sensations of the deepest humility when I sit in the gallery of the House of Commons and see the Protectionists all conscience-stricken. But what shall we say of him who is

the leader of that band of men, and who shrinks from the just responsibility which has been laid upon him? There was no obligation laid upon Sir Robert Peel to assume the reins of power. I hold that his own ambition made him seek that office; and if he will seek the power, and patronage, and influence, and fame of office, I, for one, will never allow him to shrink from the responsibility of office. . . . I do not stand up to flatter the member for Stockport. I believe him to be a very intelligent and very honest man. I believe that he will act with a single eye to the good of his country. I cannot suppose that the triumph of the great principles of which he is so distinguished an advocate is far distant, and when that is accomplished we shall be amply repaid by the marvellous change which in a few years will take place."

In the course of this fervent and effective speech, which, with others, wrought the vast meeting to a high pitch of enthusiasm, Mr. Bright referred to Cobden as "the most distinguished member" of the Anti-Corn Law League. That is a title which has never been called in question; but Mr. Bright himself must be admitted to have been the most eloquent and impressive speaker of the indefatigable band. "Cobden and Bright" were very commonly spoken of as the two chief representatives of the Association. The latter had not yet been returned to Parliament, and his work was mainly out of doors; but the basis of his reputation as an orator and as a statesman may be said to have been laid during the last few years of the Free Trade movement. Cobden had early seen the worth and power of his friend. Soon after their first introduction at Manchester, he had invited Mr. Bright to aid him in his contemplated assault on the strongholds of Protection. He had influenced the young Rochdale manufacturer as he influenced all with whom he came into contact; and there is no need to remind the reader of the terms in which Mr.

Bright has spoken of his former leader. The close connection and friendship between the two men endured until the death of Cobden, when the mantle of the one prophet—though not a double portion of his spirit—descended upon the other.

The better footing which the League had now secured in London compelled the Council to study the needs and expectations of larger and more critical audiences than their lecturers had been accustomed to address. They had occasionally held meetings in the largest room of an hotel, such as the Freemasons' Tavern, or the Crown and Anchor, or even in a public hall. In 1843, after failing to obtain Exeter Hall, they engaged Drury Lane Theatre for six nights in the course of Lent, and there held a series of crowded meetings, at which Cobden, Bright, and other members of the League delivered effective speeches. Macready was at the time lessee of the theatre, and his liberality in dealing with the League was reproved by the proprietors, who entered their veto against the employment of the building for political purposes.

On the 4th of April, a vacancy having occurred in the representation of the city of Durham, the seat was contested by Mr. Bright, who came forward as an advocate of Free Trade, and Lord Dungannon. The latter was elected by a majority of 101, but a petition was subsequently lodged against him on the ground of bribery, which proved successful, and in the following July Mr. Bright again contested the seat, obtaining a victory over his opponent by a majority of 78 votes. He made his affirmation and took his seat in the House of Commons, where he rendered great assistance to his friends in their patriotic movement.

Under one guise or another there were frequent discussions on Free Trade throughout each session of Sir Robert Peel's Administration ; and one of these, which had a special importance of its own, occurred in 1843 on the repetition

of Mr. Villiers's annual motion for the abolition of the Corn Law. It occupied five nights, and ended in a vote of more than three to one against the motion; but the logic of the debate was all in favour of the minority. The Ministers preached Free Trade, whilst professedly adhering to Protection; their uncompromising followers reproached their leaders with weakness; the Whig champions argued for the motion whilst they voted against it; and the Free Traders who had the courage of their opinions spoke out with the full force of conviction.

Cobden made a very powerful speech. Amongst other wholesome truths which he addressed to the country party was an exposure of the landlords' conduct towards their tenants. The farmers, he said, had been brought to distrust those who had so often promised them good things, and who had so often disappointed them. "The very reason they are ready to look on us with friendly eyes is that we have never promised them anything. We tell them distinctly that legislation can do nothing for them. It is a fraud. They must never allow bargaining for loaves and rents to be mixed up with politics. They must deal with their landlords as with their wheelwrights and saddlers, with a view to business and business alone. Those who are most rampant for Protection are the landlords of the worst farmed land . . . and why is it so? Not because the tenants are inferior to those elsewhere—Englishmen are much the same everywhere; but the reason is, there are political landlords—men who will not give their tenants leases but with a view to general elections."

No wonder the landlords—or such at least as felt themselves to be shrewdly hit by accusations like these—began to nurse a bitter hatred against the League and its champions. Even the farmers, in spite of Cobden's reference to them, showed great animosity against the Free Traders; and in the course of this same session the member for

Stockport was insulted and hustled in the Corn Exchange in Mark Lane.

An ardent Protectionist paper, the *Morning Post*, commented in the following strain on Cobden's lively speech, and on the effect which it had produced amongst the country gentlemen:—"Melancholy was the exhibition in the House of Commons on Monday. Mr. Cobden was the hero of the night. Towards the close of the debate he rose in his place and hurled at the heads of the Parliamentary landowners of England those calumnies and taunts which constitute the staple of his addresses to farmers. The taunts were not retorted. The calumnies were not repelled. No; the representatives of the industrial interests of the British Empire quailed before the founder and leader of the Anti-Corn Law League. . . . Melancholy was it to witness, on Monday, the landowners of England, the representatives by blood of the Norman chivalry, the representatives by election of the industrial interests of the Empire, shrinking under the blows aimed at them by a Manchester money-grubber."

Another occasion on which Cobden spoke in support of his adopted cause was on 22d of June, when he moved an amendment to a Government measure dealing with the Sugar Duties. In this motion he contended that it was not expedient that, in addition to the burdens laid on the mother country in respect of civil, military, and naval establishments of the colonies, Englishmen should be required to pay a higher price for the productions of the colonies than they would have to pay for like articles from other countries; and that, therefore, all duties favouring the colonies ought to be abolished. He carried 122 votes with him on a division, the majority for the Government being 81.

Late in August the session of 1843 came to an end, without having produced any measure, or any distinct vote, which

could be regarded as favourable to the advocates of Free Trade.

In the summer and autumn of this year Messrs. Cobden and Bright visited the market towns in a large number of midland and southern counties, for the special purpose of addressing the farmers. They were in many cases eminently successful, at any rate so far as the work of the platform is concerned. We may return to the subject of these meetings in a future chapter.





## CHAPTER XV.

### THE LEAGUE IN LONDON.

THE election of Mr. Bright for Durham, already mentioned, was eclipsed a few months later by a determined contest for a vacancy in the City of London, where the principles of the League had recently made considerable progress. Mr. Pattison, a Free-trader, fought the battle against Mr. F. T. Baring; and as he came forward distinctly as a representative of the League, and with its active co-operation, great interest was displayed in the election by the general public. The result was a majority for Mr. Pattison, and a consequent increase of strength and influence to the League, which at this time gained many converts amongst all classes.

The London election may be regarded as one of the first-fruits of the renewed exertions which the Council of the Anti-Corn Law League had put forth in the autumn of 1843, when they resolved to raise a fund of £100,000, to publish a large weekly paper under the title of *The League*, and to engage Covent Garden Theatre for fifty nights, at a cost of £60 a night. The last resolution was a bold and confident one; but the Council knew what they were about, and the event quite justified their action. The Covent Garden



meetings were a great success, and played an important part in securing popularity and ultimate triumph.

A notable champion of Free Trade in the later phases of the struggle, Mr. W. J. Fox, came into prominence at these meetings. Mr. Mongredien draws a striking picture of him as he appeared at this time on the platform. "On the 28th September the first public meeting convened by the League at Covent Garden Theatre took place. Mr. George Wilson, as permanent chairman, presided. Every part of the vast area was crowded to excess. Richard Cobden, and after him Mr. Bright, spoke, and their two admirable and effective speeches elicited enthusiastic applause. There then came forward a round-faced, obese man, of small stature, whom (if you avoided looking at his eyes) you might take to be a person slow of comprehension and slow of utterance—a sleek, satisfied, perhaps sensual person—a calm, patient, and somewhat lethargic man. The only thing remarkable about him (always excepting his eyes) was a mass of long, thick, black hair, which waved over his neck and shoulders. This man spoke, and the vast audience was thrilled by his wonderful eloquence. It was W. J. Fox, the Unitarian minister, and afterwards member for Oldham. The moment he began to speak, he seemed another man. His large brown eyes flashed fire, and his impressive gestures imparted dignity to his stature. His voice displayed a combination of power and sweetness not surpassed even by the mellow bass tones of Daniel O'Connell in his prime. His command of language seemed unlimited, for he was never at a loss. . . . Not argumentative and persuasive like Cobden, or natural and forcible as Mr. Bright, his *forte* lay rather in appealing to the emotions of his audience, and in this branch of the oratorical art his power was irresistible."

The first of the Covent Garden meetings was successful in every way. It was inaugurated by a business-like

statement of the receipts and expenditure of the previous year, which showed that nearly the whole of the second fifty thousand pounds had been spent. Nine millions of tracts and other publications had been circulated through the country; six hundred and fifty lectures had been delivered at the expense of the League; one hundred and fifty-six deputations had been sent to public meetings; and the remainder of the money had been absorbed by the general cost of the organisation, and by the salary of fourteen lecturers.

Mr. George Wilson, the President of the League, who was in the chair at this meeting, reviewed the work which had been accomplished out of doors; and he claimed that the success of Mr. Cobden and Mr. Bright in the counties had been invariable. "Go where they would," he said, "they had found no party in the country, out of Parliament, which had argued in support of the Corn Laws. . . . It was in Parliament, and in Parliament alone, that the question had to be discussed and decided. There was no great party out of Parliament that was in favour of monopoly."

This view was put very strongly before the meeting, and Mr. Cobden dwelt upon it in his speech. After some general arguments of an effective character on the relation between Protective duties and the actual condition of the country, he went on to sketch the programme of the League for the future; and this passage throws a clear light upon the working of the great organisation in its later stage. The design of the League, Mr. Cobden said, was to put itself into communication with the electors in constituencies which were represented by monopolists. "I have been," he said, "to your cathedral cities and rural boroughs, which are now represented by monopolists; and I have heard upon the best authority that three-fourths of the inhabitants are heart and soul Free Traders. Therefore we propose to provide a copy of the registration list for every

borough and every county in the kingdom. We intend to bring these registers to a central office in London, and to open a correspondence the most extensive, probably, that ever was contemplated, and the most extensive that ever, I am sure, was undertaken. Those electors amount to 800,000; but I will take 300,000, thus excluding those in the already safe boroughs, as forming the numbers necessary to constitute the return of a majority in the House of Commons. We propose to correspond with those 300,000 to begin with. We intend, then, to keep the constituencies well informed by means of the penny postage, enclosing all useful information connected with our question, together with tracts containing the most recent illustrations of it. What could be more desirable than to send to-morrow to those three hundred thousand electors copies of the newspapers containing the best reports of this meeting? But we propose to send them one letter each a week, and that will cost twopence for the stamp and the enclosure. That will be £2,500. Besides this correspondence, we shall urge upon our friends to organise themselves, and to commence a canvass of the constituencies, to ascertain the number of Free Traders; and in every case where it is possible to obtain a majority of electors in favour of Free Trade, that majority is to be asked to memorialise their members, where they have not hitherto voted rightly, to vote in favour of Mr. Villiers's motion, which will be brought on early next session. Besides that, deputations will urge upon the electors to have a Free Trade candidate ready to supplant every monopolist who still retains a seat for a borough; and the League will pledge itself, where a borough constituency finds itself at a loss for a candidate, to furnish it with one, and to give to every borough in which a vacancy occurs an opportunity for its electors to record their votes in favour of Free Trade principles."

Mr. Cobden then took up the point which had already

been touched upon by the chairman, as to the necessity of appealing from Parliament to the country at large, and as to the resolution of the League in this respect. It was not, he declared, their intention to recommend any further petitioning to the present House of Commons. At this announcement, says Mr. Ashworth, from whose account of this meeting we are now quoting, the audience, almost as one man, rose and burst into a series of the most enthusiastic cheers, which lasted for several minutes, accompanied by waving of hats and handkerchiefs, and other tokens of satisfaction. "So soon as the proceedings in reference to the electoral body to which I have alluded shall have reached such a point as to justify the step, the Council will recommend the electors—not to petition Parliament, of that enough has been done already—but to memorialise the Queen—(vehement cheering)—that she may be pleased to dissolve the present Parliament—(renewed cheering)—which, like everything generated in corruption, must necessarily be short-lived; and to give to the electors an opportunity of using the light and experience which they have acquired since the last election, to enable them to return a different class of men from those who constitute the majority of the present House of Commons."

Cobden's enthusiasm, his absolute confidence in the success of the agitation, his fervent devotion to the one clear principle which he had adopted and sworn to establish, entirely carried away his audience. His speech was a great success; as also was the speech of Mr. Bright, who came after him. The new member for Durham already displayed the oratorical qualities which have since distinguished him amongst the speakers and thinkers of the nineteenth century; and his speech on this occasion showed great fluency, vigour, power of invective, and even philosophical breadth. He took perhaps a wider view of the Free Trade question than any of his associates, and encouraged his hearers to expect

from the coming reform a vast benefit to the international relations of the greatest countries in the world. The supporters of the League, he said, and especially the most intelligent and cultivated supporters, believed that Free Trade would bless the world, and would especially bless this country. "As England was the greatest trading nation in the world, so Free Trade would benefit her most. She was the most commercial country, because she possessed the greatest powers of production and consumption, and by production and consumption, which rendered exchange a necessity, the trade of the world was carried on. They wanted to have the question settled for the world, as well as for England. They were tired of what were called the natural divisions of empires. They wanted not that the Channel should separate this country from France—they hoped and wished that Frenchmen and Englishmen should no longer consider each other as naturally hostile nations. It was common to speak of rivers, and mountains, and seas, as the natural divisions of countries, separating one nation from another, from all time and for all time; but there was no barrier which nature had reared which was a thousandth part so detrimental to the interests of mankind, or so much calculated to embitter their feelings and promote hostilities, as were those miserable and unnatural barriers which legal restrictions on trade had imposed, and which were upheld by lines of custom-houses between nation and nation."

Mr. Bright has frequently professed his fidelity to these opinions of his earlier days, which are the common opinions of all enlightened men in the present time. Even they who allow themselves to doubt the wisdom of unfettered trade under any and every condition, even when other nations resort to protective tariffs, fully admit the civilising influence of the principle as between the people of one country and the people of another. But we owe it to Mr. Bright more than to any other single man that this grand and unquestion-

able truth was made proverbial wisdom amongst the men of the last generation. The reconciling influence of free commerce between England and France, and in a less degree between England and the United States, has been very remarkably illustrated since Mr. Bright spoke in 1843.

One more noteworthy speech at the same meeting deserves to be quoted. Mr. Fox, in his peculiarly nervous, florid, and picturesque style, won a triumph equal in its way to those of Cobden and Bright. He dwelt more especially upon the sufferings of the people. Certain parts of his address would have been quite as much in keeping with the spirit of a Chartist meeting. The following eloquent passages will easily explain the deep impression which it made on the Covent Garden audience. Mr. Fox was speaking of the claims of the League on the inhabitants of the great towns. His hearers themselves knew enough of the dire poverty which oppressed the nation ; but their case was not the worst conceivable. "Did one want to exhibit it in this great theatre, it might be done, not by calling together such an audience as I now see here, but by going into the by-places, the alleys, the dark courts, the garrets and cellars of this metropolis, and by bringing out thence their wretched and famished inmates. Oh ! we might crowd them here—boxes, pit, and galleries—and with their shrunk and shrivelled forms, with their wan and pallid cheeks, with their distressful looks—perhaps with dark and bitter passions depicted in their countenances—we might thus exhibit a scene that would appal the stoutest heart and melt the hardest—a scene that we would wish the Prime Minister of this country to see, when we would say to him, 'There, delegate of majesty, leader of legislators, conservator of institutions, look upon that mass of misery ! That is what your laws and your power, if they did not create, have failed to cure or even to mitigate.' And supposing this to be done, supposing this scene to be realised, we know what

would be said. We should be told that there has always been poverty in the world; that there are numerous ills which laws can neither make nor cure; that, whatever is done, much distress will still exist. They will say, 'It is the mysterious dispensation of Providence, and there we must leave it.' 'Hypocrites! hypocrites!' I would say to them, 'urge not that plea yet; you have no right to it. Strike off every fetter upon industry; take the last grain of the poison of monopoly out of the cup of poverty; give labour its full rights; throw open the markets of the world to an industrious people; and then, if after all there be poverty, you will have earned your right to qualify for the unenviable dignity of a blasphemer of Providence. But until then, whatever restriction exists, while any impediment is raised to the wellbeing of the many for the sordid profit of the few—till then you cannot, you dare not, look this gaunt spectre in the face and exclaim, 'Thou canst not say I did it.'"

Then the speaker turned rapidly to another picture, equally vivid and affecting—the picture of the overcrowded and degraded population of the agricultural districts. "Up they troop to some great town; they come—men, women, and children; they toil their way along the high-roads, and then, without friends or help, they look around them. They look for work, they ask for alms, they endeavour in vain to find that for which they are seeking, for monopoly has been there beforehand; and having driven them out of the country, it bars the occasion for their employment in the towns, and so they are beaten and battered from pillar to post; and they have, perhaps, to incur the frown of power for some irregular attempt to support themselves. The police hunt and hound them for endeavouring to sell apples or lucifers in the streets; they are sent to the station-house, they are brought out to be committed to gaol; they pass through various stages of disease to the

only factories into which they can get—into those great factories of typhus which abound in great towns. One union workhouse sends them to another, the overseers send them to the magistrates, and the magistrates send them back to the overseers; and at last, in this hopeless and heartless strife, they drop out by the way. Death completes what monopoly began; and we, inhabitants of great towns, know that all this is passing around us, and we are quiet and acquiescing, and conscience never demands, ‘Are you not accessory to these murders?’”

The Covent Garden meetings became very popular in London, and they were always crowded and enthusiastic. Between thirty and forty were held in all—most of them in 1844—and their effect upon public opinion could not easily be exaggerated. The audience listened to arguments, to figures, to stern logic; but they also relished strong invective—such for instance as Daniel O’Connell occasionally gave them. O’Connell did not mince his words. At one meeting he made a bitter attack upon the landowners. “I declare to you,” he said,\* “the injustice and iniquity of the landed aristocracy overcome me with horror and loathing which I cannot describe! . . . They tax the bread, not for the good of the State, in which you might all equally participate—not for protection against a foreign enemy, or to keep domestic peace—but for the benefit of one particular class. All the rest of the community are taxed, that that tax may not go into the purse of the public, but that it may go into the pockets of private individuals. Why, really, it is too bad that you should be called sensible people and bear this. I, of course, mean you no disrespect, but there is a thick-headedness about it that I cannot understand. Duke of Northumberland, you are not my king! I owe you no allegiance—I will pay you no tax! Duke of Richmond—

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\* As quoted by Mr. Ashworth, p. 181.



there have been Richmonds flourishing before you, and you may have connection with royalty, but you are not my king yet, and no tax shall you have! I owe you no allegiance, and I will pay you no tax! Take them altogether, we owe them no allegiance, and we are bound to stand together one and all, in peaceable conduct, but in determination—in tranquillity, but with firmness—resolved that we will not be cheated—that we will not be robbed—that we will not be humbugged. I should like to see one of those great Dukes levying his tax in kind. I should like to behold him going into one of the lanes in our manufacturing towns, to a poor wretched family, where the father after a day's fatigue was affecting to have no appetite, that he might leave a few more mouthfuls of bread for his famishing children, or the wretched mother endeavouring to give nutriment to one babe while another was screaming because it had no food: I should like to see this great Duke, with his stars and garter, walking into such an assembly, and laying hold of the biggest hunch of the loaf, and saying, 'This is my bread-tax, and you may eat the rest of it as you like.'"

By this time the whole country was aroused; and the breadth and strength of the agitation was illustrated on the one hand by the cheers which greeted such sallies as that which has just been quoted, and, on the other, by such facts as the Marquis of Westminster's gift of £500 to the funds of the League.





## CHAPTER XVI.

### COBDEN AS AN ORATOR.

**R**ICHARD COBDEN, as we have already seen, was the hardest worker and the most indefatigable speaker on behalf of the Anti-Corn Law League. He was the captain, the leader, the model of the great economical movement which he had set on foot, and which he had determined to guide with scrupulous moderation. Others might be more fervid, more rhetorical, more attractive to a merely curious audience; but it was to Cobden that men listened when they wanted to understand all the bearings of the subject, and it was by his addresses and writings—for he was an industrious correspondent—that the most valuable converts were brought over from the camp of Protection. He had all the necessary statistics at his fingers' ends; there was no need for him to study books and prepare himself when he attended a League meeting, or a market ordinary, or a sitting of the House of Commons. He had for fifteen years past so primed and stored his mind with facts and illustrations that he was never at a loss in any company; and no company ever contained him without being conscious of, and strongly influenced by, his presence. His was the energetic spirit and genius which gave the

League its vast dynamic force, which turned a few believers into a multitude, which made the multitude an army, and which led the army to victory.

Cobden's work was specially valuable in two respects ; he formulated a truth and he converted disbelievers. It was he who, as he boasted in one of his speeches, "popularised Adam Smith," and it was he who persuaded Peel and his colleagues to make a policy of Free Trade. He "made that which had hitherto been the theory of a few philosophers" the conviction of a school of practical politicians, and who, by the devotion of his life, made the conviction become "the practice of a nation."\* The clear-sightedness which enabled him to see an overwhelming force and necessity in the idea which he had learned from the Scotch economist was not more conspicuous than the single-minded earnestness which forbade him to accept a compromise of his belief. He might have agreed, like the rest of us, with Adam Smith's theory, and then have left it alone ; and the epoch of economical reform would have been indefinitely delayed. Or he might have begun his crusade, and have been satisfied with a moderate fixed duty on corn, as he was once inclined to be ; and all the battle would have to be fought over again. But he was a man of a different stamp. The idea had come to him as a revelation, which he was constrained to preach to others ; and the task, once undertaken, was persevered in with invincible resolution.

These were the two great causes of Richard Cobden's success ; and they were rendered all the stronger by the ingenuousness and straightforward earnestness of his manner, which invariably impressed his hearers.

Of Cobden's personal character and talents we shall have other occasion to speak. For the present, we regard him merely as an orator, bearing witness to his convictions

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\* Thorold Rogers, *Cobden and Political Opinion*, p. 62.

on public platforms or on the floor of the House of Commons. The quality of his speeches was different from that of Mr. Bright's, of O'Connell's, or of Fox's. He did not reach the lofty, forcible, voluminous rhetoric of the former; he could not match the vehement invective of the "Liberator," nor the turgid and picturesque style of the Unitarian minister. He was more calm than either of these; he kept himself closer to his theme, and illustrated his arguments not so much with imaginations as with simple and telling facts. For that reason he was the most persuasive of all the lecturers who pleaded the cause of Free Trade. The others might work more quickly and effectively upon the emotions of their hearers, and might for a moment elicit more enthusiastic cheers; but Cobden converted and convinced. He was not dry: there is life enough in his recorded speeches; and, as we have seen, he could use the language of invective, and even of menace, when roused to fervour by circumstances of special excitement. But his characteristics were those of quiet reserve and thorough confidence in his principles, of calmness and strength, such as a man may feel when he knows that the steady accumulation of evidence is absolutely certain to achieve his object.

The campaign amongst the farmers, which has already been referred to, was perhaps the most successful of Cobden's efforts as a platform speaker; and at all events his speeches during this tour, in the spring, summer, and autumn of 1843, have been more completely reported than any others made by him to provincial audiences after his election to the House of Commons. He went professedly as an evangelist amongst the farmers, to preach them glad tidings of what was to befall them in the future; and at the same time he was well aware that they regarded him as a daring intruder, and that they were for the most part disposed to receive him with incredulity and antipathy. In some

cases they protested against his interference ; in other cases they stayed away from his lectures ; and in a very few cases they out-voted him.

But the chief objection to the visits of Cobden and Bright to the agricultural boroughs were raised by the landowners, the objecting farmers being in many instances the mere mouthpieces of their landlords, with whose interests they imagined their own to be inextricably bound up. The fact that at the great majority of these meetings the Free Trade resolution or amendment was triumphantly carried may be attributed in part to the presence of others beside farmers, in part to the recent adoption of Free Trade principles as a political cry by the Opposition leaders, but also no doubt in great measure to the genuine power of persuasion exercised by the chosen advocates,\* by which unquestionably the Protectionist party lost many adherents.

Coming ostensibly as emissaries from the large manufacturing towns, the two chiefs of the Anti-Corn Law

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\* Mr. Ashworth, to whom I am indebted for the specimens of Cobden's addresses to the farmers contained in the present chapter, writes as follows of this provincial campaign :—" Although the Council of the League found it advisable to carry the agitation for Corn Law repeal into the strongholds of the enemy, and for this purpose to obtain the services of a host of lecturers, amongst whom were to be found some of the most eloquent men in the kingdom—as, for instance, Wm. Johnson Fox, sometime M.P. for Oldham ; George Thompson, sometime M.P. for the Tower Hamlets ; Dr. J. Bowring, afterwards M.P. for Bolton ; Mr. Sidney Smith ; Mr. J. S. Buckingham ; Mr. A. W. Paulton ; Mr. James Acland ; Mr. R. R. R. Moore, Barrister-at-law ; Mr. T. Falvey, and many others—yet the great leaders of the League did not at any time hold themselves absolved from hard work. On the contrary, this extension of the agitation only increased the desire of the people throughout the country to listen to Messrs. Cobden and Bright ; and they, although both engaged in and dependant on their incomes from trade, yet left their establishments to the conduct of partners or assistants, whilst they devoted time, talent, health, and income to explode a great fallacy, to denounce and overturn a piece of

League were not surprised to find themselves looked upon with jealousy and even aversion by many of the squires, their dependants and sycophants. But they laboured, not unsuccessfully, to strengthen the sympathies between the two sections of the community, and to show the farmers how infallibly their own advantage must be promoted by the general extension of trade, which might in the first instance benefit the inhabitants of the great towns. Thus at Norwich, in March 1843, Cobden impressed on his hearers (as recorded in the "Anti-Bread Tax Circular") this fact of the mutual dependence of the two classes. "We," he reminded them, "send our manufactures to you in the agricultural districts, and you send your corn to us; and yet there are political landlords who would fain persuade you that your interests and ours are opposed to each other. Did not Dr. Marsham, at the Buckingham dinner, say that five millions of the people of this country lived upon oat-meal, and five millions more rejoice upon potato diet? Let these people be fed as they ought to be fed. Let

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unjust and selfish legislation, and by so doing to increase the welfare of the country at large; and they did this at a time when even the utmost care and attention to business often failed to bring a profitable result. Mr. Cobden, besides fulfilling his duties in Parliament, and assisting at meetings of the League in Manchester, London, and other large towns, found time to address no less than thirty-one county meetings; whilst Mr. Bright also attended thirty similar gatherings; and, at fifteen meetings out of a total of forty-six, both gentlemen attended and spoke. On these occasions they were frequently accompanied by the veteran Colonel Thompson, and occasionally by the Hon. C. P. Villiers, M.P. It would have been strange indeed if the calm, argumentative, and persuasive eloquence of Mr. Cobden, with the fiery energy and earnest denunciations of injustice and folly levelled at the aristocracy and the legislature by Mr. Bright, and the trenchant sarcasms of Colonel Thompson, had not told upon public opinion; and the numerous adhesions to the cause of Free Trade which followed these meetings clearly showed that the workers would not fail of their ultimate reward."

them be fed as the working population in America are fed—let them have wheaten bread every day—let them have butter and cheese—and let them have free scope for their industry, and they will then be able to buy these things. Give to the artizans the free trade they ask for, and the demand for their labour will enable them to purchase the extra quantity of corn that will be brought in from abroad, and you will be left with plenty of customers still.”

Cobden's argument in this passage is not for the mere repeal of the Corn Laws, but for the establishment of Free Trade. The particular was gradually being absorbed in the general, not with him alone but with the League as a whole; and though they continued to recognise and maintain that the question of food duties stood on a basis quite distinct from that of any other kind of imports, yet at the same time they had come more and more freely to adopt the wider platform.

At Taunton the orator branched off into a rapid sketch of the history and effects of the obnoxious laws restricting the importation of corn. Under the present system of corn and provision laws, he observed, the farmers were the least prosperous part of the community, judging by their own declarations. “They had either been great hypocrites in saying that they had been distressed and unprosperous, or else they had been the most unfortunate part of the community. It began in 1815, and the professed object of the law which was passed in that year was to give the farmers a high and steady price for their wheat. Well, from 1815 to the present time there had been five successive periods of agricultural distress; five times had the farmers, as a body, been up in arms, complaining of what they called unparalleled distress and difficulty. Could they say that any other class of traders, such as drapers, grocers, etc., or professional men, had been found up in arms in a similar manner complaining of their condition! If this unparalleled distress had only

come upon the farmers, was that not *prima facie* evidence that something had particularly interfered with their interests? He would go back to 1815 to see how the law had produced distress. The law was made for keeping corn up to 80s. per quarter. Some of those who advocated what they called Protection denied that; but the evidence taken before the House of Commons in 1814 went to show that they passed the law to keep the price of wheat up to 80s. per quarter, and for this purpose—to keep out foreign wheat. When they had got the law, the landlords and their stewards went and bargained with the farmers for their rents, and they (the farmers), under the impression that they were to get 80s. per quarter for their wheat, entered into arrangements accordingly. What was the consequence? In 1822, seven years after this arrangement, wheat was selling in the English markets at 42s. per quarter. . . . Then in 1828 the farmers got another law, and they then thought they had got the perfection of Protection. The sliding scale of duty was adopted in 1828, and the object of that scale was to keep corn up at from 65s. to 70s. per quarter; and the farmers again entered into arrangements with the landlords and their stewards, and the land agents were again set to work to fix the proper rental of the land. What followed? Why, in December, 1835, wheat was sold for 36s. per quarter.” Thus the effect of the Corn Laws had been to ruin trade and starve the people. “They destroyed trade so that people could not even buy wheat at 36s. a quarter. The poor were dying off, and women and children and weak men perished by thousands during these years.”

This is a very good instance of the calm and convincing argument employed by Cobden when he had an audience who could thoroughly understand him, and who might be supposed to be fairly open to conviction. Every word must have told with the Somersetshire farmers; and it is easy to understand that these conventional Protectionists might



have been won over by scores and hundreds to the cause so clearly explained to them, and in which they recognised themselves to have so large an interest. It was evident enough, in all the speeches made by Cobden to the farmers, that he knew and sympathised with their difficulties; and it would have been a contradiction of human nature if they had been able to listen to his words unmoved. It was the cause of the distressed tenants themselves which he pleaded with so much discrimination and tact; and he offered them a remedy which could not greatly injure them, whilst it would certainly bring them new customers in place of any they might lose. As Cobden said at a meeting in Hertfordshire, on the 29th of April, farming for many years past had been the worst of all trades, notwithstanding the protection it had received from Parliament. "There had never been any members representing the particular interests of grocers, drapers, innkeepers, or other trading persons sitting in the House of Commons. Whatever Parliament might do, farmers could command good prices for their produce only so long as their customers could afford to pay them, and the farmers' customers were the town population, the traders, the manufacturers, and merchants of the kingdom. When the distress existed among them, it could not fail to reach the agriculturists, and what the latter body was now suffering from was the reaction of the distress suffered by the former, which was as sure to follow as night to succeed the setting of the sun."

Here was an explanation of their misfortunes and grievances such as had never yet been given to them; but it bore on its face the stamp of truth and accuracy, and commended itself to their acceptance. It would be a mistake to suppose that a majority of the farmers took Mr. Cobden for a prophet, or even for an authority; but a certain number of them did, and many more felt inclined to give his plan for relieving them a fair trial.

As an example of the simple and ready illustrations by which the orator was wont to enliven his speeches, the following passage from a speech at Uxbridge may be cited. It had once been argued, he said, that the country would be ruined by the introduction of railways. "He recollected the present Duke of Buckingham presiding at a meeting at Salt Hill to oppose the making of the Great Western Railway, on which occasion his Grace represented railways as the most pestiferous things in the country—just as, in former ages, some people had been found to weep and mourn when they could no longer burn old women for witchcraft, declaring that the country would be ruined by the alteration of the law on that subject. He would take a more recent case. Previous to 1824 the duty upon foreign wool was 6d. per lb. The manufacturers complained that they could not carry on their business if the duty was maintained at this high price. A Parliamentary Committee was appointed, and the reduction of the duty to 1d. per lb. ultimately determined upon, notwithstanding strong opposition on the part of the landlords. What was the result? British wool advanced in price from 11d. to 1s. 10d. per lb., whilst the imports increased from 5,000,000 of pounds avoirdupois, at high duty, to 56,000,000 of pounds when the duty was lowered."

The next passage is peculiarly interesting, because it includes certain details of an autobiographical character. At Reading, towards the end of August, as the session was coming to a close, Cobden addressed a meeting from which most of the neighbouring farmers had been persuaded to keep away; though, to counteract this deliberate trick of the landlords, the League took care to have the speech printed, and sent by post to every farmer who had voted for the Protectionist candidates in the last county election. "Some apology," said Cobden, "or at least explanation, was due to the farmers of Berkshire for calling them together

on such an occasion, at that hour of the day, and at a season of the year when their occupations were certainly of a most important character. In attempting to remove the Corn Law as the foundation-stone of all other monopolies, they of the League were met in the House of Commons by a body of landowners, who told them that this Corn Law was necessary for the benefit of the farmer and of the farm labourer. If those men would avow their own reasons for maintaining the Corn Law, the task of the League would be comparatively easy; but when they thus put forward the farmer and the farm labourer, saying that all they did was for their benefit, it became a doubly difficult matter to get rid of the Corn Law. He had always had his suspicions, since he was a boy on his father's farm, that the Corn Law was no benefit to the farmer or to the farm labourer. From the first moment he could think at all on the subject, he confessed that he had always viewed the Corn Law as a rent law, increasing rent to the landlord and tithe to the tithe-owner; and since maturer years had given him an opportunity of looking more narrowly into the subject, and examining the evidence contained in the blue-books of the House of Commons on agriculture, the suspicion he had before entertained had become a conviction—that, instead of it being a benefit to the farmer and the farm labourer, the Corn Law was an injury to them all. He therefore left the House of Commons, and went to the country, to challenge discussion on this subject—to call upon the supporters of the Corn Law in the rural districts to meet him, and defend it before their neighbours and friends; and if they shrank from meeting him in a place like Reading, whatever their pretence might be, it must be that they felt, convinced that their cause was a bad one, and that they could not maintain it."

Cobden's speeches on these occasions were more economical than political; but now and then he found an opportunity

to go into the political aspects of the case. Whenever he did so, he took care to point out that party had very little to do with the question. It was plain that he personally inclined to the Liberals more than to the Tories ; but still he was never an ardent partisan for anything but Free Trade. The time came when he might have entered the Cabinet, and he declined the offer made to him. But whilst the battle continued to rage, he kept himself very carefully from identification with either of the two great parties which divided the honours and responsibility of Parliamentary government. The Tories, he said in a speech delivered at Rye, had simply humbugged the farmers. They had made them great promises, but no sooner were they in office than they left their former friends in the lurch. As for the Whigs, being out of office, they wanted to get in again, and they were trying to make the farmers believe in the efficacy of a fixed duty. "Now," said Cobden, "do not let them deceive you : a fixed duty of even one shilling a quarter is a fixed injustice. I will show you in a few minutes why we cannot have a fixed duty on corn. What I want to know is, why there should be any meddling with the farmer's more than any other trade. Why is the trade of a farmer to be protected more than that of a butcher, or a grocer, or a draper ? But, with all this protection, where is the farmer who, with the same capital, has made more money than those who have followed the other trades that I have mentioned ? We have not had a set of landlords sitting, night after night, to protect grocers or cabinet-makers ; and yet, according to their own admission, they have done better, as a rule, than the farmers have with all this protection, as they call it. I know that you have the same feelings as I have, in private, and that farmers say one to another, 'This is only a landlord's question.' Then, I say, why cannot farming be carried on without being meddled with by legislation ? To hear us talk in Parlia-

ment about farmers, one might suppose that farming was not a trade, but an office under the Government, and that we voted you a certain sum of money annually out of the taxes. I shall be told by some of those men who advocate a little monopoly, that you could not carry on farming without being protected. Now I have travelled a good deal, and I never found foreigners work harder than Englishmen, nor cheaper; and I believe that in England, taking into account the quantity of labour performed in a given time, it is cheaper than on the Continent. We shall be told that farmers have exclusive burdens. I say quite the contrary. The landlords have taken off all exclusive burdens, not to benefit the farmers, but to raise the rents and benefit themselves. If there be these exclusive burdens, why do they not prove them? We have challenged them to do so in the House of Commons, but they have declined. But if they have made a mistake in overtaking themselves, why not arrange it, and not place this bungling tax on the poor man's loaf?"

One of the last of the autumn addresses to the farmers was delivered at Oxford in September, when Cobden won a notable victory at a public meeting from Lords Camoys and Norreys, Mr. Henley, and other representatives of the territorial interest in the county. In this address he appealed very successfully to the farmers as to the results which had accrued to them from the policy of Protection, and from the return of Sir Robert Peel to power at the last general election. He contended that the forcing up of the price of corn had done little more for them than to force up their rents. That was what they actually received as their share of the benefits of the Corn Laws; but it was by no means all that had been promised them. They had been deceived even in the matter of prices for their produce. The Corn Laws, he insisted, had cheated the farmers ever since 1815, by leading them to expect prices which they had never

obtained. "In 1814, witnesses before a committee of the House of Commons stated that the land could not be cultivated unless there was a price of 80s. a quarter for wheat. The law of 1815 recognised that price. If there is any man here who remembers that period, let me ask him, was it not the universal belief that the law of 1815 would secure 80s. a quarter for wheat? And what was the price of wheat in 1822, seven years afterwards? Why, only 42s. a quarter. In 1822 the agricultural distress was universal. In a single Norwich newspaper of that period there were no less than 120 advertisements of sales of farming stock. Well, what did you do? The tenants went and asked—for what? Why, for another Act of Parliament! They had an Act giving them a nominal price of 80s. a quarter; so they asked for another Act. Well, more committees sat, more witnesses were examined, and, after five or six years, another Act was given you, involving that perfection of wisdom, the sliding scale. That sliding scale was to secure not only high prices, but steady prices. In 1828 the sliding scale passed, and you were to have 64s. a quarter for your wheat. Well, you took the sliding scale, and in 1835 wheat was down to 39s. 4d.; and there may be many here who remember it being sold in Oxford market that year at 35s. Well, you'd have thought the farmers had had enough of Protection after this. But no! the Parliament of 1841 was dissolved. The 'farmers' friends' came down to the hustings, and the sillier a man was, the greater the promises he made you, so much the more did you farmers throw up your caps at him. Yes, there's not a farmer here who won't confess it; he'll hang down his head like that man there, but he'll confess it nevertheless. Well, I heard your 'friends' propose their last Corn Law. Sir Robert Peel brought it forward, and he said he would give you, as far as legislation could secure it, a price ranging from 54s. to 58s. a quarter for your corn. Well, in less than eighteen months after he had

made that promise, what were the prices of wheat? From 46s. to 47s. a quarter—10s. less than it had been promised to the farmer only twelve months before! I say, therefore, that those legislative Acts have never realised to the farmer what they promised; and I say, further, that Acts of Parliament never can give you high prices. The farmers have taken farms on the strength of these Acts, and they have been ruined because they could not pay the rents for which they had taken them; and it is because these Acts have ruined you that I am here to-day to denounce what is called legislative Protection."

Here, as elsewhere, Cobden urged the farmers to make common cause with the manufacturers, in order to get rid of the system of monopoly, from which both classes suffered in so especial a manner. Each depended on the other; and it was in the power of the producers of food to secure a vast increase in the number of their customers, which would more than compensate them for any foreign competition. "Your prosperity," he said, "depends on the manufacturers. Believe me, whatever designing people may tell you, you cannot injure the manufacturing population without the distress and suffering returning upon your class. But I will tell you how you may make us your best customers; I will tell you how you may improve our means of dealing with you. Knock off our fetters; give us freedom for our industry; let us grow and shoot as freely as garden trees; let us expand under the influence of the burning sun of liberty, and I will promise you then that we shall not have taken root in vain."

There can be no doubt that this provincial tour of the leading Free Traders had a very beneficial effect, and contributed largely to the eventual success of the movement. The farmers as a class were not won over, but there were many converts amongst them, and the League had every reason to be satisfied with the achievements of its lecturers. 1843

was a year of hard work and growing confidence for the economical reformers. For the first time they made it manifest that they had a large and enthusiastic party behind them in the country. The provincial meetings were supplemented by the monster meetings at Drury Lane and Covent Garden Theatres, which proved that the metropolis had been virtually won by the Manchester organisation; and without doubt the members of the Government had been deeply impressed by the demonstration.

The Manchester Council at once felt the benefit of these enthusiastic meetings in the great accession of strength by which they were followed. An article in the *Anti-Bread Tax Circular*,\* commenting on the proceedings at Bedford, when Cobden defeated a Protectionist resolution by a majority of three to two, described the orator as "a sort of Napier in his way," who liked "to carry the war into the enemy's camp, no matter what the odds in numbers, or what preparations they had made for defence. At Bedford the squires, like the Beloochees, died hard. They neither gave nor took quarter. At Hertford their tactics were different. They affected to treat the meeting there with contempt, and were beaten by two to one. At Uxbridge they tried argument, with what success poor Colonel Wood may say! At Bedford they wisely resolved not to trust too much to reason, but to canvass the county betimes, in the belief that the farmers must stand by their opinions, if once put down in black and white. This excess of caution bespeaks alarm; it shows that experience is getting the better of prejudice amongst the tenantry, and that the landlords dare not trust their own jury, however dexterously packed. The fact is, that a few leading truths have been knocked into men's heads by Mr. Cobden, which have found the readier reception because they explain a phenomenon occurring

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\* Ashworth, *Recollections*, p. 110.



periodically in the emptiness of their pockets, in spite of a law which promises them a higher price than they have ever yet got for all the wheat and barley which they grow. They formerly believed that Parliament could fix the prices of corn just as easily as it creates a turnpike trust; and although they sometimes got a glimpse of the fact that the largest portion of the gain must go into the pockets of the landlord, they hoped that time would give them a fairer share of the cake. Their faith is now completely shaken by Mr. Cobden's proofs that no Corn Law can ever guarantee them even 36s. a quarter, and they may well ask, as they did at Bedford, 'What is the use of a Corn Law, if tenants are to get Dantzic prices and to pay English rents?'

In fact, it is tolerably safe to say that the work of conversion, so far as the country was concerned, had been practically accomplished by the end of 1843. Henceforth it was a mere question of overcoming official reluctance, and of inducing the Government to yield to the wishes of a popular majority.





## CHAPTER XVII.

### SIR ROBERT PEEL'S FINANCE.

**I**T was on the first day of the year 1844 that the Marquis of Westminster sent his donation of five hundred pounds to the funds of the League, and in a letter to the Chairman of the Council he expressed a hope that they would obtain from the Government, whoever might be at the head of affairs, the fullest measure of free trade compatible with the national credit. This adhesion of the marquis, together with his munificent gift, formed a subject for congratulatory comment at a large number of meetings held during the first half of January, by branch associations of Free Traders throughout the country. These meetings were assembled in anticipation of the new session of Parliament, but rather with a view to influencing the minds of the Government and the Protectionists than as a preparation for action in the House of Commons itself. Only a few weeks had passed since the representatives of the League had declared, in Covent Garden Theatre, that they would appeal from Parliament to the people; and the comparatively languid proceedings of the economists in the two Houses sufficiently proved their determination to abide by this decision.

Meanwhile the Protectionists became thoroughly alive to the perils of their position. Alarmed by the provincial gatherings of the previous year, and by the spirit which Cobden and his friends had aroused amongst the county voters, the landowners set up an opposition league in their own interests, which they called a "Society for the Protection of Agriculture." The Duke of Richmond acted as Chairman, and many locally influential men did their best to endow this new creation with vitality; but it effected very little against the steady progress of the Free Trade movement. The more this progress was made manifest the greater became the exasperation of the landlords, and some of these relieved their feelings by describing the members of the Anti-Corn Law League as "ragamuffins," as "the refuse of mankind," as instigators of disorder and assassination, and the like.

On the 14th of March Mr. Cobden made a formal motion, in order to secure a test division, for a Select Committee to inquire into the effect of import duties on tenant farmers and farm labourers. The motion was defeated by a majority of 91 in a House of no more than 350. It is needless to say that the agitation out of doors was not calculated to have much effect on the votes of the House of Commons, at any rate so soon after Cobden had announced his resolution to appeal from the members themselves to their constituents. In the following June Mr. Villiers's annual motion for a repeal of the Corn Laws was defeated by the large majority of 328 to 124. This was almost all that occurred in Parliament during the session of 1844 in connection with the great economical question which was so deeply agitating the minds of the people. There were, indeed, other financial and commercial measures of very considerable importance. It was the year of Sir Robert Peel's Bank Charter Act and of Mr. Gladstone's railway regulation proposals, as well as of the Government's Sugar Duties Bill, on which they were

defeated by a combination on both sides of the House. The Cabinet secured a reversal of the adverse vote by a threat of resignation ; but the issue was mainly confined to the rate of differential duties on sugar produced by free and slave labour respectively. The Budget of the year showed a surplus of more than four millions, and an estimated surplus of more than three millions, out of which Mr. Goulburn reduced the duties on wool, coffee, currants, and two or three other articles.

The Manchester Council was working hard all this time in its educational campaign, bent on its task of instructing the voters in every constituency, and preparing them for the next general election, when it was generally supposed that the battle would have to be fought out. The work achieved by the organisation in this one year was enormous. No fewer than three-and-a-half millions of publications were set out from the offices, including 20,000 copies of the League paper each week. The daily average of letters written and despatched was one thousand, whilst the average number received was nearly one hundred a day. Lectures were delivered in the various borough and county constituencies of England and Wales at the rate of about twelve in each week ; and in addition to this, it must be remembered that the Liberal newspapers were now fast adopting the principles of the League, and assisting it in preparing the mind of the country for a change.

A device was resorted to in 1844 which was not without its influence on the result, though it was professedly intended to operate only when the constituencies were asked for their verdict. A clause in the Reform Act of 1832, known as the Chandos clause, had given the franchise to small freeholders in the counties ; and it occurred to Cobden and his colleagues that the strength of their party in any future election might be vastly increased by the wholesale purchase of qualifications. They therefore recommended

their friends to adopt this course ; and the advice was taken in a large number of instances. The clause had been freely acted upon in past years by the territorialists themselves, who had no ground whatever for complaint against the reformers ; and this system of creating faggot votes was not yet regarded with disapproval by public opinion as it afterwards came to be. So thoroughly did the League pursue its new policy that the organ of the Duke of Richmond's Protection Society began to sneer at it as a "registration club," and to suggest that the wealthy manufacturers of Lancashire, West Yorkshire, and Cheshire were determined to buy the political power which their principles could not secure for them.

An interesting event of this year was the coquetting which took place between the League and the Young England party, under the leadership of Mr. Disraeli. Early in October the last-named, with his friends Lord John Manners and Mr. Smythe, paid a visit to Manchester, where they attended and spoke at a banquet at the Athenæum Club in that city. Cobden and other Free Traders were there, and mutual compliments passed between the two groups of remarkable men who were thereafter to play such prominent parts in the history of their country. Cobden, as we know, was not averse from receiving assistance to his cause whenever and by whomsoever it might be offered, and he would naturally look with complacency on the chance of detaching a few votes from the large Ministerial majority which so consistently snuffed out his motions in the House of Commons. He could not at that moment foresee the day when Sir Robert Peel would represent the policy of Free Trade in Parliament against the fervid declamations of his fellow-guest.

As for Mr. Disraeli, the reader of his romances will remember that the time of which we are writing was the period in his career when he was producing the trilogy of

*Coningsby*, *Sybil*, and *Tancred*, written expressly to familiarise Englishmen with the idea of a political party of youthful reformers, who were to cement the "new union" between the Tory aristocracy and the democracy. It was a union in which Cobden and his friends could certainly find no place so long as the Corn Laws remained in force; but Mr. Disraeli was just the man to conceive a method for the bridging over of such a difficulty. However this may be, it is certain that the novelist has more than once adorned his pages with a sketch whereof some of the features were suggested by Richard Cobden. Millbank in *Coningsby*, and Job Thornberry in *Endymion*, have been identified by some critics with the Free Trade champion who entered Parliament for the first time in 1841, at the moment when the leader of the Young England party was casting about for recruits.

Meanwhile the state of the country as a whole had shown no great improvement since the crisis of 1842. The purely agricultural districts were even worse off, in many respects, than they had been when Sir Robert Peel took office, for whoever profited by the Corn Laws it was certainly not the class of farm labourers. In some branches of trade and manufacture there had been an advance. The modifications of the tariffs introduced by the Peel Administration had not been without a good effect, and a stimulus of a very wholesome character was felt in the markets which depended on these tariffs. The surplus of 1844 was only one sign of a more hopeful future, and there were a few sanguine politicians who began to look forward to a general recovery of national prosperity. But the advocates of Free Trade saw in all these facts only an additional incentive to perseverance. Mr. Mongredien correctly estimates the position of affairs in the autumn of this year. "There was now," he says, "every promise of another abundant harvest, which would, if realised, accelerate the improvement which was already visible in almost every branch of trade. A more

cheerful tone prevailed among all classes of the community but one. The national revenue had recovered with unexpected elasticity, and not only was the previous year's deficiency of £2,400,000 cleared off, but a large surplus remained. The condition of the working classes had undergone considerable amelioration, except in the case of agricultural labourers. What with heavy rents based on high prices, and comparatively low prices consequent upon a good harvest, farmers were sorely tried, and they cut down the wages of their men to the utmost endurable point. In many districts the farm labourers, ignorant and torpid, had to submit to a pittance of 5s., 6s., or 7s. per week, and their misery drove them into savage despair. Rick-burning and incendiarism in various forms became rife in the counties of Suffolk and Norfolk, and the agricultural section of the empire exhibited a striking exception to the universal improvement. In startling contrast to this fact was another fact—that they were by far the most highly protected class in the country.”

There were, of course, at least three distinct classes in the “agricultural section” of the community—landlords, farmers, and labourers. The landlords were thoroughly protected in their own special interests, and they thrived upon it. The farmers were so far protected that they were isolated from competition in the food markets, and they occasionally profited by securing high prices for their productions—though the profit was only temporary and intermittent. The labourers were entirely without protection in their own especial interests, and the consequence was that they suffered more than any one.

Protection, in fact, was a very good thing for those who had the reality as well as the name. But what Cobden and his friends were endeavouring to show was that the system known as Protection was a reality only for a few monopolists, whilst it was a mockery and a sham for everyone else.



## CHAPTER XVIII.

### THE CONSERVATIVE SPLIT.

THE compromising spirit displayed by Sir Robert Peel's Cabinet had been gradually sowing dissension in the ranks of the Protectionists ; and the year 1845 opened amidst evident signs of disorganisation in the Ministerial majority. The defeat of the Government in the preceding session, on the amendment of Sir P. Miles to their Sugar Duties Bill, had served as a warning to Ministers of what they might expect if any considerable body of their supporters should see fit to coalesce, for however brief a period, with the Liberal Opposition ; and as the dissatisfaction of the ultra-Protectionists increased, it became more and more manifest to Sir Robert Peel that he would have to choose between a defeat by such a coalition and the acceptance of Liberal aid on his own part. The events of 1845 assisted him in coming to a conclusion on this somewhat delicate issue.

Out of doors the Premier was beginning to fare worse than in Parliament itself. "The complaints of the Conservative malcontents grew continually louder and deeper. The old protective laws, it must be remembered, and especially those relating to corn, were favourable to English



growers and to all connected with the landed interests, to the detriment of the people at large. The landlords and the farmers clung to the discredited system of monopoly as long as it was possible to do so; they considered their prosperity to be bound up in it, although there were not wanting sensible men who reminded them that the general increase of national welfare must of necessity be shared by them; and, consequently, they were enraged to think that the very men whom they had assisted into power in 1841, and on whom they had looked as the advocates and champions of their own particular interests, should now show signs of tampering with those interests, and yielding to the clamour for Free Trade. Little by little Sir Robert Peel became very unpopular in the counties, and there were ominous signs of discord in the Conservative ranks."

The remarks quoted above are taken from the present writer's account of *The Life and Work of Lord Beaconsfield*,\* where the part played by Mr. Disraeli in the struggle of Protection against Free Trade is passed under review. Sir Robert Peel, as it is there pointed out, was too open to conviction to please his most uncompromising followers, some of whom doubted the strength of his Tory principles, and did not scruple to call him a traitor to his party. "Both in and out of the House he was attacked and accused; and the nearer his views approached to those of the Free Traders, the more bitterly was he assailed by men who had been elected to support him. Amongst the Conservatives who, between 1843 and 1845, began to fall away from his leadership, and to form an irreconcilable group of the majority, was Mr. Disraeli himself. He had hitherto followed, praised, and even flattered Peel; but it is manifest that at this time his feelings underwent a complete revulsion. He made himself one of the spokesmen of the Opposition on the Ministerial

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\* Vol. II. of the present Series.

side of the House, and began to taunt and abuse his former leader. . . . Whilst Mr. Disraeli was thus defining his position as a Tory, in anticipation of the split in the Conservative ranks which he was one of the first to foresee, his great rival in the future, who had already made his mark in the House, and who was amongst the most favoured and faithful friends of Peel, was playing a most important part in the great controversy of the day, and contributing as much as any one else to the triumph of the Free Trade movement." Mr. Gladstone was without a seat in this session; and he employed his leisure in writing a pamphlet on *Recent Commercial Legislation*. "In this important work, which indicated the tendency of the writer's mind towards inevitable conclusions on the economical questions of the day, Mr. Gladstone reviewed the measures passed within the previous four sessions, and showed that in every case the modification or abolition of duties had stimulated trade and improved the condition of the country. He expressed a belief that the truest statesmanship would thenceforth consist in removing the fetters from industry, and seeking rather to liberate the hands of working-men than to protect isolated classes of the community. We may never know how much Sir Robert Peel owed to the clear and energetic mind of his former colleague and friend; but perhaps we shall not err in assuming that this pamphlet, and the practical conversion which it attests, had something to do with the apparent conversion of the Premier to the views of the Manchester School."

The first indication of the Premier's intention to advance in this session upon the same path of commercial reform which he had already entered three years before, was given in a speech on the 14th of February, when he explained the Budget for the ensuing twelve months. This Budget estimated the surplus at about a million and a half, without the Income Tax; but Sir Robert Peel invited the House of Commons to renew their tax for a further term of three

years, and to devote the surplus of £3,409,000, which he would then have at his disposal, to the complete abolition of the duties on glass, cotton, wool, and foreign timber, to the reduction of the sugar duties, and to the repeal of no fewer than 430 imposts on articles which yielded only moderate increments of revenue. He admitted that his proposal was a bold one, which could not be acceptable to all his friends; but, responsible as he was for the result, he was not afraid of the risk which he ran.

A month later, Cobden moved for a Select Committee to inquire into the cause and extent of the agricultural distress; but he was defeated by a majority of 92. On the 17th of March, Mr. Miles, speaking in behalf of "the agricultural interest"—which of course was not precisely the same thing as the interest of the agricultural labourers for which Cobden had pleaded—asked for the appropriation of a part of the surplus to the needs of his clients. He found no more than seventy-eight supporters, but a lively debate arose upon his motion. It was in the course of this debate that Mr. Disraeli made one of the first of his pungent attacks on Sir Robert Peel in connection with the subject of Free Trade. "If," he said, "we are to have Free Trade, I, who honour genius, prefer that such measures should be proposed by the hon. member for Stockport (Mr. Cobden), than by one who, through skilful Parliamentary manœuvres, has tampered with the generous confidence of a great people and a great party. For myself, I care not what may be the result. Dissolve, if you please, the Parliament you have betrayed, and appeal to the people, who, I believe, mistrust you. For me there remains this at least—the opportunity of expressing thus publicly my belief that a Conservative Government is an organised hypocrisy."

The Premier declined to enter into a personal controversy with his assailant, but he reminded the House that in 1842, when the modification of the tariff was proposed, Mr.

Disraeli had declared that "the conduct pursued by the right honourable baronet was in exact, permanent, and perfect consistency with the principles of Free Trade laid down by Mr. Pitt." Sir Robert added that he held the panegyric and the attack in the same estimation. He might have quoted yet more striking passages from Mr. Disraeli's speeches in 1842 and 1843, in which he had maintained that Sir Robert Peel was not the Minister of a class but of the people, and that his proposals were conceived in the highest mood of statesmanship.

The opened breach between the Premier and the least tractable of his followers was widened by the Maynooth discussion, when the Government measure for endowing that Roman Catholic seminary in Ireland was supported and carried by aid of the Liberals. The numbers were: For the Bill, 158 Conservatives and 165 Liberals; against it, 145 Conservatives and 31 Liberals.\* The enlightened and liberal policy of the Government in regard to Ireland increased the vivacity of the attacks made upon him by Mr. Disraeli and other Conservatives, which served to hasten the adoption of Free Trade principles by Sir Robert Peel. For the present, however, no better fortune attended the efforts of the recognised advocates of change. Mr. Villiers was defeated in his annual motion by a majority of 132, and the session ended without any indication that the Ministerial conversion was at hand.

In this session a Committee of the House of Lords was appointed to inquire into the special burdens on land; and several prominent Free Traders tendered their evidence, chiefly for the purpose of showing that the landlords bore comparatively light burdens of taxation and rating. The result of the Committee's labours does not seem to have been as cogent as their lordships anticipated; for of course

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\* Irving, April 19, 1845.

the object of Lords Stanley, Buckingham, and Richmond had been to prove the necessity of special protection for their menaced interests.

Meanwhile the Anti-Corn Law League had actively prosecuted its task. In May 1845, it held a bazaar in Covent Garden Theatre, which has become famous in the history of the Free Trade movement. During the three weeks of its continuance more than 100,000 persons paid for admission; the stalls were presided over by four hundred ladies, the wives and daughters of the members; and more than twenty-five thousand pounds were added to the funds of the League. This handsome contribution brought up the year's receipts to £116,000.

Miss Martineau gives her impressions of this memorable bazaar in a striking passage "*Covent Garden Theatre*," she says, "was fitted up with great taste and skill for a bazaar; and the show was something quite unlike anything ever seen before in this country. In the large Gothic hall into which the theatre was transformed, there was a great display of manufactures—freely presented in aid of the League fund—which sold for £25,000, besides leaving a sufficient quantity to supply another large bazaar at Manchester. It was open from the 5th to the 29th of May, and 125,000 persons paid for admission within that time. Four hundred ladies conducted the sales; and, generally speaking, each contributing town had a stall, with its name, and sometimes its civic arms, painted above it. The porcelain and cutlery exhibitions, the mirrors and grindstones, the dolls and wheat-sacks, shoes and statuettes, the relics of antiquity and the last fashion of coloured muslins, flannels, and plated goods, anatomical preparations, laces and boots, made a curious and wonderful display, which was thought to produce more effect on some Parliamentary minds than all the eloquence yet uttered in the House of Commons."

The members of the League were naturally proud of this

success, which unquestionably did much to advance their cause, even if it did not assist in the conversion of the Government. As fostering and illustrating the enthusiasm of the metropolis for Free Trade principles, it may even be held to have exercised an influence on Sir Robert Peel and his colleagues. The official organ of the League wrote of it in the following terms:—

“No catalogue of particulars can give anything approaching to an adequate idea of the magnificent whole, and no language can picture an exhibition which presents, in one view, specimen-products of every variety of that vast industry which has made this little island a queen among nations. The brilliant success—a success concentrating on a single focal point of time and space the work of many months and of every part of the United Kingdom—is such as really startles with its splendour even those who have watched the undertaking through every step of its progress, and who have personally superintended every detail of its execution. We had but imperfectly realised that vast conception which the zeal of the Free Traders of Great Britain gave us to execute, and which now stands before the world in all its finished magnificence, a spectacle without precedent and without rival. But it is not as a mere spectacle that we can speak or think of our League bazaar. It is not for a piece of pageantry that our great manufacturing and mining capitalists have obeyed the suggestion of the women of Great Britain, and sent the hulkiest and costliest products of the loom, the forge, and the steam-engine, to be exhibited under one roof with the fairy-like creations of women’s exquisite taste and delicate handiwork. It is fraught with high moral meaning. There is a deep, true soul in it. It is the embodiment of a profound conviction. It is the utterance of a stern and inflexible determination. It is a nation’s manifesto against a gigantic iniquity.”

This was not the only occasion on which ladies took part in the Anti-Corn Law League. The President of the League rendered a deserved tribute to their enthusiasm and perseverance at a Covent Garden meeting held soon after the closing of the bazaar. Mr. Wilson said (as quoted in Mr. Ashworth’s book\*) :—“From the first, many ladies have

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\* *Recollections*, p. 187.

attended our meetings, and countenanced by their presence the greater portion of our public proceedings; and in a time of great distress in our manufacturing districts, when our petitions to the Legislature had failed, they memorialised Her Majesty the Queen, praying that it might please her to look upon the sufferings of the people, and to mitigate them by admitting for consumption, duty free, the corn which was then lying in bond. The ladies obtained signatures to that memorial by a personal canvass from door to door, and in the depth of winter, throughout the manufacturing districts of the North of England."

The Covent Garden bazaar was almost the last great effort which the Anti-Corn Law League was called upon to put forth. Nature herself was coming to its assistance; and in the autumn of 1845 events occurred which decided the wavering mind of Sir Robert Peel.





## CHAPTER XIX.

### THE LAST STRAW.

**T**HE last straw which broke the camel's back of endurance, and made it impossible for any prudent and dispassionate statesman to maintain his defence of Protection, was the potato disease. The menace of an entire failure of this crop, the vast increase of distress in all parts of the United Kingdom, the fear lest the growth of the root should thenceforth be impossible, and the manifest necessity for wholesale importation of grain, worked together upon the minds of those who were responsible for the lives of the people, and practically frightened them into concession.

Early in August 1845 the potato growers and dealers began to complain of the serious aspect of their crops.\*

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\* "One fine day in August, Parliament just having been prorogued, an unknown dealer in potatoes wrote to the Secretary of State, and informed him that he had reason to think that a murrain had fallen over the whole of the potato crops in England, and that if it extended to Ireland the most serious consequences must ensue. This mysterious but universal sickness of a single root changed the history of the world. 'There is no gambling like politics,' said Lord Roehampton, as he glanced at the *Times* at Princedown; 'four Cabinets in one week; the Government must be more sick than the potatoes.'"—*Endymion*.



Week by week the accounts grew worse, and at length it was seen that a dire calamity was about to fall upon the country. On the 13th of October Sir Robert Peel wrote a letter to Sir James Graham, subsequently published, which may be accepted as marking the crisis of the conversion to which he had gradually been brought. "I foresee," he said, after mentioning the failure of the potato crop, "the necessity that may be imposed upon us at an early period of considering whether there is not that well-grounded apprehension of actual scarcity that justifies and compels the adoption of every means of relief which the exercise of the prerogative, or legislation, might afford. I have no confidence in such remedies as the prohibition of exports or the stoppage of distilleries"—remedies which had been proposed in some quarters. "The removal of impediments to import is the only effectual remedy."

On the last day of the same month a long Cabinet Council was held to consider the emergency, which, in Ireland especially, threatened to develop into famine and pestilence. Sir Robert Peel drew up a memorandum expressing the views which he had urged upon his colleagues. "The calling of Parliament at an unusual period," he wrote, "on any matter connected with the scarcity of food, is a most important step. It compels an immediate decision on three questions: Shall we maintain unaltered?—shall we modify?—shall we suspend the operation of the Corn Laws? The first vote we propose—a vote of credit, for instance, for £100,000, to be placed at the disposal of the Lord Lieutenant for the supply of food—opens the whole question. Can we vote public money for the sustenance of any considerable portion of the people on account of actual or apprehended scarcity, and maintain in full operation the existing restrictions on the free import of grain? I am bound to say my impression is that we cannot."

Next day Lord Stanley wrote to the Premier, expressing his regret that he should differ so widely in opinion with him

and Sir James Graham "as to the necessity of proposing to Parliament a repeal of the Corn Laws." "I foresee," he said, "that this question, if you persevere in your present opinion, must break up the Government one way or the other; but I shall greatly regret, indeed, if it should be broken up, not in consequence of our feeling that we have prepared measures which it properly belonged to others to carry, but in consequence of difference of opinion among ourselves."

Lord Stanley was touching upon a question which was afterwards to be discussed with great eagerness and obstinacy; but it is somewhat remarkable that he should have thought it necessary, in the crisis of a national scarcity, to consider which of the two political parties was entitled or compelled to enact a measure which he did not deny to be a measure of relief.

Sir Robert Peel persisted in his effort to relax the import duties forthwith; but he was out-voted in the Cabinet. He proposed to issue an Order in Council remitting the duty on grain in bond to one shilling, and opening the ports for the admission of all species of grain at a smaller rate of duty, until a day to be fixed upon. It was only as a temporary expedient that he suggested this remission of duty; but his colleagues could not bring themselves to agree with him. Sir James Graham, the Earl of Aberdeen, and Mr. Sidney Herbert voted with him, but the rest of the Cabinet negatived the proposal—some through dislike of the principle, others because they thought that the evidence of necessity was not sufficiently strong.

The secret history of this period—the history which was not at the time laid bare to the general public—proves that Sir Robert Peel was actuated by a conscientious feeling of duty. He really regarded it as a matter of life and death to the masses of the people; but he could make no other reply to the appeals and reproaches constantly addressed to him than to declare that "the subject was occupying

the unremitting attention of Her Majesty's confidential advisers."

Meanwhile one after another of the prominent men of the day, who had not hitherto given in their adhesion to the doctrines of Free Trade, or at any rate to the programme of the League, now came forward to announce their conversion. Lord John Russell wrote to his constituents on the 22nd of November, protesting against further indecision and procrastination. "It is no longer worth while," he said, "to contend for a fixed duty. In 1841 the Free Trade party would have agreed to a duty of 8s. per quarter on wheat, and after a lapse of years this duty might have been further reduced, and ultimately abolished. But the imposition of any duty at present, without a provision for its extinction within a short period, would but prolong a contest already sufficiently fruitful of animosity and discontent. . . . Let us then unite to put an end to a system which has been proved to be the blight of commerce, the bane of agriculture, the source of bitter division among classes, the cause of penury, fever, mortality, and crime among the people. But if this end is to be achieved, it must be gained by the unequivocal expression of the public voice. It is not to be denied that many elections for cities and towns in 1841, and some in 1845,\* appear to favour the assertion that Free Trade is not popular with the great mass of the community. The Government appear to be waiting for some excuse to give up the present Corn Laws. Let the people, by petition, by address, by remonstrance, afford them the excuse they seek. Let the Ministry prepare such a revision of the taxes as in their opinion may render the public burdens more just and more equal; let them add any other provision which courteous and even scrupulous forbearance may suggest;

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\* Lord John Russell would have in his mind the recent contest for Sunderland, when Colonel Thompson, though actively supported by Messrs. Cobden and Bright, was defeated at a by-election.

but let the removal of restrictions on the admission of the main articles of food and clothing used by the mass of the people be required in plain terms, as useful to all great interests, and indispensable to the progress of the nation.”\*

Cobden himself could not have written with more vigour. The effect of Lord John's letter was very great, and it was heightened by the conversion at the same time of Lord Morpeth, Lord Shaftesbury, and others, who added the weight of their personal influence to what had now become an irresistible demand. Meetings were held daily in many parts of the country; resolutions were adopted and forwarded to the Premier; the excitement became as great and as general as it had ever been before. The League was, of course, extremely active; and it had been amongst the first to draw a moral from the failure of the potato crop in favour of the abolition of the Corn Laws.

Mr. Ashworth gives an account of a League meeting held on the 28th of October, in the Free Trade Hall at Manchester, for the purpose of devising further financial plans, which shows the intensity of the feeling aroused by the critical condition of the country. “The attendance on the platform,” he writes,† “indicated a remarkable amount of sympathetic feeling amongst wealthy manufacturers. The audience within the hall was estimated at upwards of eight thousand persons. Mr. Wilson, the chairman, called upon Mr. Cobden, who at once directed attention to the proper remedy for the calamity—viz., the opening of the ports of the United Kingdom. He proclaimed this as the only means by which to provide against the famine which threatened starvation and death to millions of our fellow-subjects in Ireland. His speech was very eloquent, and concluded

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\* Lord John Russell's resolution to accept the principle of total abolition was taken, as he has himself declared, against the advice of his Whig friends.

† *Recollections*, p. 196.

thus:—‘ We must not relax in our labours ; on the contrary, we must be more zealous, more energetic, more laborious than we have ever yet been. When the enemy is wavering, then is the time to press upon him. Let us at once come forward to avert this horrible destiny. I call, then, upon all who have any sympathy with our cause, who have any promptings of humanity, or who feel any interest in the wellbeing of their fellow-men, upon all who have apprehensions of scarcity and privation, to come forward and avert this impending visitation.’ ”

Mr. Bright was present at the same meeting, and made a vigorous speech. “ At this moment,” he said, “ all around us is strengthening the conviction of former years, and is telling us, in a voice louder than ever, that all the words of reproach, all the harsh sayings which we have uttered against the Corn Law, have failed to express its true character as it is now exhibited before us. The present state of feeling is one of distrust and alarm. And why ? Is it not because the prices of provisions are rising, and that there is an apprehended scarcity before us ? It has been said that the Corn Law was a law to secure plenty, and to secure it from our own soil. If that be true, then in this hour of apprehended scarcity, of distrust and alarm, what is there to which we should so readily turn in the hope for relief as to this very Corn Law, which has been pronounced to be the height of legislative wisdom ? . . . Peel’s pet law is now working precisely as its supporters wished it to work. It is to prevent the trade in foreign corn—to make you and your fellow-men—the twenty-seven millions—work and work, and scramble and scramble, and starve it may be, in order that out of the produce of your industry—out of the scarcity of wages of the many—something may be taken by law, and handed over to the rich and the great, by whom and for whom the law was made. . . . How dreadful the abandonment of duty, how awful the crime, not less than

that of those who made the Corn Law, if we should fail in the work we have set ourselves to do, which is to abolish the law that restricts the bounty of Providence, and to establish the original and Heaven-given law, which will secure plenty to all the earth."

The resolution arrived at by the League was to raise a fourth fund of half-a-million sterling, with which to renew the agitation in 1846; and at a large public meeting on the 23rd of December the subscription was opened.

On this occasion Mr. Ashworth was the first speaker, and in introducing the business of the day he used expressions which brought out more strongly than the League meetings had been wont to do, the fact that some, at least, of its members regarded the question as specially one of cotton manufacture against corn monopoly. The audience, Mr. Ashworth said, represented more than the town of Manchester; there were present men from the neighbouring districts "upon whose shoulders rested the great interests of our cotton manufacture—a manufacture not yet seventy years in existence, but which had already attained the greatest magnitude and importance of any organised industry which the world had ever seen. A crisis had arrived when they ought to consider the impending dangers to that industry, and of famine to the community at large; and also to determine whether the cotton manufacture of this country should hereafter become matured to a greater extent of usefulness and power, or be compelled to sink submissively under the baneful influence of corn monopoly. It was well known that the cotton trade had now become essential to the continuance of our wellbeing as a nation. It owed no sort of allegiance to the soil of England (and examples were not wanting to show that by a mistaken policy it might be driven hence to other shores), and it was evident it could only be retained in a state of prosperity in this country by adopting the Free Trade policy so strongly

insisted upon by the League." Mr. Ashworth then proposed—"That this meeting hereby expresses its high sense of the invaluable services which the National Anti-Corn Law League has rendered to the cause of Free Trade, and that, in order to enable the Council to make renewed and increased exertions for the repeal of the Corn and Provision Laws, a subscription in aid of the great fund of £250,000 be now commenced; and that the following gentlemen (whose names were announced) be appointed a committee to canvass for subscriptions in Manchester and the surrounding districts."

This resolution having been carried unanimously, one person subscribed £1500, twenty-three persons subscribed £1000 each, one subscribed £700, twenty-one subscribed £500, and the total amount promised in the room was no less than £60,000. Mr. Cobden, who was present, expressed his high satisfaction on finding that there was a "determination in the country to back the exertions of the League with adequate funds, to whatever period the controversy might be prolonged. Two years ago, when they held a meeting in a small room adjoining, and when £14,000 was subscribed, an influential London paper, in its graphic mode, designated the League a 'great fact;' and now when the subscription of to-day was over £60,000, he thought the League might be designated a still greater fact. The fair and honest settlement of the Corn and Provision Laws—that is, their total abrogation—would at once dissolve the League; and it might be useful to some of their more candid opponents that they should know this." Possibly thinking that Mr. Ashworth's reference to the cotton trade might be misunderstood, he added that "they had not been promoting a narrow interest; the cause was that of the whole kingdom—of the whole world—and in carrying out Free Trade from this, its birthplace, the cradle of their principles, Manchester would become identified to all ages

with the cause—just as Jerusalem was with the origin of our faith, and just as Mecca was in the eyes of the Mahomedans, so would Manchester be identified in the eyes of historians as the birthplace and the centre of the greatest moral movement since the invention of printing; one which would have a greater effect in the world's history than any struggle that had ever taken place in the annals of civilisation."

Cobden's pride was pardonable; and the manner in which he contrived to set the Free Trade agitation to which he had devoted himself on a higher level than one of sectional interest affords a testimony to the statesmanlike elevation of his views.

On the last day of November Sir Robert Peel was strengthened by a memorandum from the Duke of Wellington, who had a seat in the Cabinet without office. The Duke began by declaring his opinion that the continuance of the Corn Laws was essential to the interests of agriculture "in its present state," and especially to that of Ireland, and that the laws were "a benefit to the whole community." But (and this was the Duke of Wellington's guiding principle in politics) a good government for the country was more important than Corn Laws or any other consideration. Accordingly the Duke affirmed that "as long as Sir Robert Peel possesses the confidence of the Queen and of the public, and he has strength to perform the duties, his administration of the government must be supported. My own judgment would lead me to maintain the Corn Laws. Sir Robert Peel may think that his position in Parliament, and in the public view, requires that the course should be taken which I recommend; and if that should be the case, I earnestly recommend that the Cabinet should support him, and I for one declare that I will do so."

The logical deduction from this rather vague statement might seem to be that the Duke would concede from fear



what he would not concede from principle. To grant a measure for the sake of "good government," which was nevertheless maintained to be contrary (in its natural effects) to "the benefit of the whole community," could scarcely be anything else than an expedient to prevent the people from using force. But the logic was not pressed home in the Duke of Wellington's case, though Sir Robert Peel, as we shall see, fared worse.

On the 4th of December an announcement made in the columns of the *Times* took most persons by surprise. "The decision of the Cabinet," according to that paper, "is no longer a secret. Parliament, it is confidently reported, is to be summoned for the first week in January, and the Royal Speech will recommend an immediate consideration of the Corn Laws, preparatory to their total repeal." This statement was one of the first public intimations that the Cabinet, or an important section of it, was contemplating the repeal of the laws, and it was received with much excitement. The *Standard* next day flatly contradicted it as an "atrocious fabrication," and the Protectionists refused to believe that they had been thrown over by their friends in the Government. As a matter of fact, they had not been. Lord Stanley and the Duke of Buccleuch had positively refused to agree to any measure which would "involve the ultimate repeal of the Corn Laws," though most of the other members of the Cabinet would have followed the Duke of Wellington's advice by concurring in Sir Robert Peel's proposal. But the Premier doubted his ability to carry a serviceable measure under the circumstances; and he therefore sought an interview with the Queen on the 5th of December, and tendered his resignation.

The Queen having proposed to send for Lord John Russell, Sir Robert stated that he had been prepared to bring forward a measure which would have been in accordance with the last paragraph of Lord John's address to his

constituents ; and if such a measure were now proposed by the new Liberal Government, he should use his influence to promote its success. But when Lord John asked him for a pledge that he would support immediate and total repeal, he felt it his duty to decline. After a few days, and when it was clear that he could not rely on even a temporary majority in the House of Commons, Lord John Russell gave up the attempt to form a Ministry, at the same time promising his co-operation in the settlement of a question "which in present circumstances is the source of so much danger, especially to the welfare and peace of Ireland."

Thus, a fortnight after his resignation, Sir Robert Peel was again charged with the duties of first Minister of the Crown. By the end of the year he had reconstructed his Cabinet, appointing Mr. Gladstone to the Colonial Office in the place of Lord Stanley, who could not overcome his reluctance to accept the approaching change. The Duke of Buccleuch, however, "felt it his imperative duty to his Sovereign and his country to make every personal sacrifice," and remained in office as Lord Privy Seal. Other irreconcilables amongst the leading Tories were the Dukes of Buckingham and Richmond ; whilst the Protectionists as a body made no attempt to conceal their rage at the defection of Peel. They were not all so extravagant in their reproaches as a Dublin Conservative paper, which said of Sir Robert, in the interval between his resignation and resumption of office :—"He obtained power as a traitor, he abandoned it as a coward ; for, after all, the dastard died of fear. At the head of the greatest party that England ever formed, with a majority in both Houses of Parliament such as no Minister ever yet commanded—what is he now ? A degraded creature at the feet of Lord John Russell, humbly praying that he may be a participator with him in power, or, this being refused, that he may be elevated to a peerage."



## CHAPTER XX.

### ABOLITION.

**T**HE session of 1846 was opened on the 22nd of January. It was known beforehand that the Corn Laws were at length to be repealed, by a coalition between the moderate Conservatives and the Liberals; but the advocates of reform did not, in the meanwhile, relax their efforts. A few days before the reassembling of Parliament, Lord John Russell, speaking at Glasgow, observed that if Sir Robert Peel wished to propose a safe measure, it must be formed on broad and extensive principles. And Cobden, addressing a large meeting in the Free Trade Hall, said that whatever course the Premier might pursue, Free Traders had but one course, which was to insist throughout on total repeal. They had nothing to do with Whigs or Tories; they were stronger than either party, and could beat them both. Some suspicion had been raised by the sudden conversion of most of Sir Robert's colleagues, and it was thought possible that he might have won them back by a compromise which would destroy the value of his measure. These fears were in some degree justified.

The Queen's speech expressed the satisfaction with which Her Majesty had given her assent to the Bills previously

passed, having for their object to extend commerce and stimulate home industries, by the repeal of prohibitive duties and the relaxation of protective duties. Parliament was now exhorted to consider whether the principles on which it had already acted might not with advantage be yet more extensively applied. This was at any rate promising; and Sir Robert Peel confirmed the impression by his speech during the debate on the address. After admitting that the "mysterious calamity" of the potato disease had led to his resignation in December, and to the legislative change which he now contemplated, he went on to pay a just tribute to the apostles of Free Trade. "It would be unfair," he said, "if I were to say that I attached exclusive importance to that particular cause. I will not withhold the homage which is due to the progress of reason and to truth, by denying that my opinions on the subject of Protection have undergone a change. Whether holding a private station or a public one, I will assert the privilege of yielding to the force of argument and conviction, and acting upon the results of enlarged experience. It may be supposed that there is something humiliating in making such admissions. Sir, I feel no such humiliation; I should feel humiliation if, having modified or changed my opinions, I declined to acknowledge the change for fear of incurring the imputation of inconsistency."

The true question for them to consider, the Premier said, was whether the change was sufficiently explained by facts, and whether the motives of the change were disinterested. It would be base to change merely from a personal feeling; but when the change appeared to be reasonable, no public man would be justified in resisting it for fear of the taunts which he might bring on himself. He went on to vindicate the genuine character of his Conservatism against those who had impugned it. It was no easy task to ensure the harmonious and united action of an ancient monarchy, a proud aristocracy, and a reformed House of Commons. It was for

this end that he was labouring, and for such objects only did he value the possession of power. But even for these objects he did not covet it. "It is a burden far above my physical, infinitely beyond my intellectual strength. The relief from it with honour would be a favour, and not a punishment." He did not shrink from the responsibilities, the sacrifices, the perils of office, but he would not retain it with mutilated power and shackled authority. "I will not stand at the helm during the tempestuous night if that helm is not allowed freely to traverse. I will not undertake to direct the course of the vessel by observations taken in 1842. I will reserve to myself the unfettered power of judging what will be for the public interest."

This noble declaration was warmly received by the House, and won for Sir Robert Peel the sympathy of all but his most bitter enemies—who had until recently been his most fulsome flatterers. A few days later he unfolded the policy which he had decided to adopt. There was, on the face of it, a fatal blot in the eyes of the uncompromising followers of Messrs. Villiers and Cobden, inasmuch as it proposed to continue the Corn Laws, in a somewhat modified form, for three years longer. The Premier proposed to fix the minimum duty at four shillings when wheat was sold at 53s. a quarter, rising to a maximum of 10s. when wheat had fallen below 48s. Other grain was to be charged less in proportion, and all grain from the colonies was to be admitted duty free. Numerous reductions or remissions were made in respect of other customable articles. In the shape of compensation to the landlords and agriculturists there were certain proposals diminishing the "burdens on land," including a relief of the local rates in respect of the poor.

In a long and powerful speech the Premier appealed to the territorialists to assist him in making these readjustments of the revenue, which he considered inevitable in any case, and for which the time seemed to be so opportune.

"From a sincere conviction that the settlement is not to be delayed; that, accompanied with the precautionary measures to which I have referred, it will not inflict injury on the agricultural interest—from these feelings I should deeply lament, exclusively on public grounds, the failure of an attempt which, at the instance of Her Majesty's Government, I have made on this occasion, to recommend to your calm and dispassionate consideration these proposals, with no other feeling or interest in the ultimate issue than that they may, to use the words of Her Majesty's speech, conduce to the promotion 'of friendly feeling between different classes—to provide additional security for the continuance of peace—and to maintain contentment and happiness at home by increasing the comforts and bettering the condition of the great body of the people.'"

The chief objection taken to these proposals by Cobden and his friends was on the ground of the three years' delay; but the advocates of Free Trade concerned themselves, between the introduction of the Corn Importation Bill and its second reading, less in opposing the measure than in strengthening the hands of the reformers. The League held meetings; their candidates won the West Riding of Yorkshire without a contest, and Westminster after an obstinate struggle between Sir de Lacy Evans and Admiral Rous. The cause, however, sustained a check of a remarkable character in South Nottingham, which had been rendered vacant by Lord Lincoln's acceptance of office under Sir Robert Peel. As the Duke of Newcastle still clung to the Protective principles, and Lord Lincoln contested the county as a Free Trader, his father employed the family influence against him with such success that he was defeated. The Duke's conduct on this occasion affords an instance of the excited state into which the Government proposals had thrown a large number of the champions of Protection. The Duke of Buckingham boasted at a public

dinner that he and the Duke of Richmond would do the Bill all the harm they could, and cripple it so that it could never become law. The Duke of Richmond himself assured his fellow-peers that the Anti-Corn Law League would never rest until it had destroyed the Church.

The Corn Importation Bill was read a second time, after being debated for twelve nights, on the 27th of February. Cobden in his speech told the Protectionists that the laws on which they set so much store were regarded by the country as emblems of witchcraft—horse-shoes nailed to the door to keep the witches away. He had another topic provided for him by a bitter remark of Mr. Disraeli, who had twitted Sir Robert Peel with having styled Mr. Cobden an assassin—alluding to the speech of the Premier after the murder of Mr. Drummond in 1843, to which reference has been made in a preceding chapter. This unkindly reminder gave Sir Robert Peel an opportunity of withdrawing fully and unequivocally “an imputation on the hon. member for Stockport which was thrown out in the heat of debate under an erroneous impression of his meaning.” And Cobden reciprocated the good feeling of this apology by declaring his own regret at the terms in which he had referred to the Premier. He trusted that “all he or the right hon. baronet had previously said on that subject would be obliterated from their recollection, and that no one on either side of the House, after what had passed that night, would attempt to revive the matter or make any allusion to it.”

By this time, it may be observed in passing, Richard Cobden had already endeared himself to most of those who knew him by his simple and candid character, and by the real generosity of which the above remark, and especially the dignified reference to Mr. Disraeli's insinuation, are an instance. He was acute enough in controversy when aggression was a necessity; but his natural and ordinary tone was eminently conciliatory.

The actual leader of the Protectionists was not Mr. Disraeli, but Lord George Bentinck, who spoke for more than three hours in this debate, after everybody had made up their mind. The second reading was carried by 337 to 240 ; and the subsequent stages, as well as the tariff resolutions, were passed by equally decisive majorities. Nothing that Lord George Bentinck and his followers could do availed to defeat or mutilate the Bill. Mr. Villiers attempted, without success, to make the operation of the measure immediate ; he was supported by no more than 78 votes. Some delay, however, was caused by the obstruction of the Irish members, owing to a Coercion Bill which the Government had thought themselves bound to introduce, and which eventually brought about their overthrow.

The Protectionists joined with the Irish members and a few English Radicals in opposing this Bill ; and a remonstrance from Cobden on the obstruction of public business—though he was opposed to coercion—led to a triangular duel between him, the Premier, and Mr. Disraeli, which is described by Mr. O'Connor in his *Life of Lord Beaconsfield* :—

“Mr. Cobden,” says Mr. O'Connor, “used a sentence by accident which had serious results. He was arguing that whatever temporary success the coalition of the member for Limerick (Mr. Smith O'Brien) and Lord George Bentinck might have in defeating Sir Robert Peel's measure, the Corn Laws were doomed. These laws might still be supported by the friends of Lord George Bentinck, but there were other people to be considered—there were the people of England. ‘I don't mean,’ went on Mr. Cobden, ‘the country party, but the people living in the towns, and who will govern this country.’ The last sentence in this passage is open to misunderstanding—if taken by itself. It might be interpreted to mean that the towns should govern the country. But taking the passage in conjunction with what preceded and followed it, the meaning is plainly enough this : that however these aristocratic landlords might rave, whatever devices they might employ to defeat Sir Robert Peel's Bill, the people generally were determined that, for once and all, the Corn Laws should be abolished. That this was the meaning of it is made perfectly clear by the sentence which follows :—‘I tell him that *the English people, and*



*the Scotch, and the Welsh, and I believe the Irish too*, are, from what I have heard, determined not to be content with a suspension, but to have a total abolition of the Corn Law.' The speech of Mr. Cobden was, as a whole, favourable to the Government, and a crushing condemnation of the tactics of the Protectionists. It received accordingly a considerable amount of applause from the Treasury Bench; and Mr. Disraeli, knowing the readiness to take offence of the insolent dullards by whom he was followed, saw that this circumstance might be utilised against Sir Robert Peel. He first accused Mr. Cobden of defining the people of England as 'the persons who live in the towns,' which, as I have shown, was altogether a forced construction on Mr. Cobden's words; and then went on to say:—'The right hon. baronet immediately cheered that expression. The circumstance struck me at the time, for it came from the same right hon. individual who was once so proud of being at the head of the gentlemen of England. At the moment that the hon. member for Stockport, in a tone of menace, threatened the country party with the control of public opinion, and said that a powerful sentiment of indignation would arise among the people of England at their conduct—in the most frank and open spirit he gave them his definition of what the people were, as being the inhabitants of the towns—the right hon. baronet cheered that sentiment—he accepted that definition.' . . . The phrase of Mr. Cobden was innocent enough; all he meant to say was that the people were determined and able to overcome faction. But suppose Mr. Cobden's words had the meaning attributed to them by Mr. Disraeli, was Mr. Disraeli justified in making his charge against Sir Robert Peel? Even if Sir Robert Peel thought the towns should rule the country, was it likely that a man of his cautious character would cheer the expression of such an opinion? . . . A long and desultory discussion ensued and the natural result followed. Mr. Disraeli was shown by Mr. Cobden to have totally misrepresented his words. Sir Robert Peel, confirmed by several others, proved that Mr. Disraeli's assertion that he had cheered the supposed definition was incorrect; and Mr. Disraeli had to apologise both for the misrepresentation and the false charge."

The third reading of the Corn Importation Bill was carried on the 15th of May by a majority of 98. Another passage of arms between Sir Robert Peel and Mr. Disraeli is worth notice, mainly on account of an apparent sneer at Cobden, introduced in the latter's "venomous attack," as the Premier

justly called it. "The first day after the right hon. gentleman made his exposition to this House," Mr. Disraeli said, "a gentleman well known and learned in all the political secrets behind the scenes, met me, and said, 'What do you think of your chief's plan?' I said I did not exactly know what to say about it, but, to use the phrase of the hour, I supposed it was a great and comprehensive plan. 'Oh,' he replied, 'we know all about it: it is not his plan at all; it is Popkin's plan.' And, sir, is England to be governed and convulsed for Popkin's plan?"

This poor wit had no effect upon the House, for whether the repeal of the Corn Laws might be called Peel's or Cobden's plan, every accurate observer of the state of England at that crisis knew that the country had been convulsed for want of Free Trade, and that it could be appeased only by the opening of the ports. Perhaps it would have been appeased more completely and speedily if the ports had been opened forthwith, instead of deferring for three years the virtual emancipation of trade.

In the House of Lords there was some warm debating, but no prolonged struggle. The Dukes of Richmond and Buckingham did their best, and Lord Stanley warned his colleagues against hasty and ill-considered legislation. The Duke of Cambridge, the Duke of Beaufort, Lord Malmesbury, and others, spoke angrily or solemnly against the Bill, whilst in favour of it were Lords Granville, Clarendon, Brougham, Grey, and the Duke of Wellington. The second reading was taken by a majority of 211 to 164—a large vote for the House of Lords, and a surprisingly large majority, due perhaps in great measure to the earnest appeal of the Duke of Wellington.

Thus the Corn Law Importation Bill passed both Houses, and received the royal assent.

The scale of duties on imported wheat, as settled for the next three years, was as follows:—

|                                                                                                                                                        |  |  |      |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|------|
| Whenever the average price of wheat, made up and published in the manner prescribed, should be under 48s. a quarter, the duty on importation was . . . |  |  | 10s. |
| 48s. and under 49s. . . . .                                                                                                                            |  |  | 9s.  |
| 49s. and under 50s. . . . .                                                                                                                            |  |  | 8s.  |
| 50s. and under 51s. . . . .                                                                                                                            |  |  | 7s.  |
| 51s. and under 52s. . . . .                                                                                                                            |  |  | 6s.  |
| 52s. and under 53s. . . . .                                                                                                                            |  |  | 5s.  |
| 53s. and upwards . . . . .                                                                                                                             |  |  | 4s.  |

For barley the duty was fixed at half the above rates, and for oats rather less. From the 1st of February 1849, the duty on all kinds of grain was to be fixed and remain at one shilling a quarter; and at that rate in fact it did remain, until it was dispensed with by Mr. Gladstone twelve years later.

Large progressive reductions were at the same time made on timber and agricultural seeds, whilst the duties were entirely repealed on a long list of articles of food, live and dead meat, cotton, linen, silk, and wool, and manufactures of these "not wholly or in part made up." A few additional duties were imposed, as on spirits from British possessions, hitherto free; and on the whole Mr. Goulburn expected a fair surplus of revenue for the year 1846-7.

Such was the economical scheme proposed and carried by Sir Robert Peel in 1846. Something more remains to be said of his motives in performing the task, and of the political consequences, to himself and others, which immediately followed its performance.





## CHAPTER XXI.

### PEEL'S REWARD.

WHEN Sir Robert Peel made up his mind to forget the prejudices which he had nursed in favour of a limited Protection, and to give the nation the full boon of the Free Trade which it had so vigorously demanded, he knew that he would have to make great sacrifices, both of feeling and of party influence. For this he was quite prepared, and his speeches in the House of Commons during the session of 1846 showed that he could contemplate the loss of power and office in a magnanimous spirit. But at the same time it does not appear that he regarded this outcome of his public action as inevitable, at any rate at the beginning of the year. He probably looked forward to the establishment of a permanent coalition of a great national party recruited from all sections of opinion, strong in the memory and prestige of the reforms to which he had brought himself and a large number of his supporters on the Conservative side.

There is evidence of such an ambition, and of such elevation of mind, in the accounts which Peel gave to his friends during and after the struggle, in letters and memoranda, as well as in the contemporary testimony of other

public men. "The Minister who settles the Corn Law is not so easily turned out," he said to Prince Albert on one occasion. The Prince mentioned the fact in a letter to Baron Stockmar, written in February 1846; though clearly the writer was already doubtful as to the consequences of the Conservative disruption. "Peel," he writes, "is abused like the most disgraceful criminal, and the opinion is generally current that the measure once through, the Opposition and the hostile two hundred will seize some opportunity of ejecting him by a joint vote. This would be a great misfortune. Peel shows boundless courage, and is in the best of spirits; his whole faculties are roused by the consciousness that he is at this moment playing one of the most important parts in the history of his country." Peel's instinct was right enough so far. He was doing a great work, which would make him for ever famous, and establish his repute as a statesman on sure foundations. But he was too sanguine if he expected that his political supremacy would endure without so much as a break of continuity. How it might have been if he had not given a handle to his enemies at the moment of their deepest exasperation, it is impossible to say. Perhaps in any case he must have lost office and appealed to the country, and even under the most favourable circumstances he might have been left in a minority after a general election. But if he had lived, if his career had not been cruelly cut short within four years of his greatest achievement, it is quite within the bounds of probability that he would have once more led a popular majority to new victories.

The shoal which wrecked him was, in some sense, a danger of his own seeking. The Irish Coercion Bill doubtless seemed at the time to be forced upon him by circumstances; but, apart from the apparent necessity of the time, it was a mistake in tactics which ought to have been carefully avoided. Possibly not a single member of Sir Robert Peel's Govern-

ment dreamed that the defeated monopolists would seize this particular occasion of allying themselves with the regular Opposition to eject him from office. As Cobden declared, in opposing coercion as a matter of principle, the majority against it was a combination of those who wished to defeat the measure, but not the Premier, of those who had formerly advocated coercion, but who now thought that their way to office would be opened up by its rejection (that is, the Whigs), and of those who would risk any consequence in resenting their defeat on the Corn Laws.

The Coercion Bill was thrown out by a vote of 292 to 219. There were many absentees who could not bring themselves to oppose the measure, as they would have wished to do, at the cost of defeating the Premier at such a crisis, or who would not support it at the cost of voting for their repudiated leader.

On the 29th of June Peel announced the resignation of the Ministry, and the assumption of office by Lord John Russell. His speech on this occasion was full of dignity and eloquence. He admitted that his defeat was the natural consequence of his acts. When Ministers, he said, saw fit to adopt a policy apparently at variance with the course which they had hitherto pursued, subjecting them to the charge or taunt of inconsistency, it was advantageous for the country that their conduct should be visited by expulsion from office; and he made no complaint on that score. He did not even claim the merit of origination for the measures which he had proposed; and here Sir Robert Peel paid a generous tribute—a tribute which he, and Mr. Gladstone after him, frequently renewed—to the part which Cobden had taken in the Free Trade movement. “I have no wish,” he said, “to rob any person of the credit which is justly due to him. I may say that neither the gentlemen sitting on the benches opposite, nor myself, nor the gentlemen sitting around me—I say that neither party is justly entitled to the credit of

these measures. There has been a combination of parties, and that combination, and the influence of Government, have led to their ultimate success; but the name which ought to be, and which will be associated with the success of these measures, is the name of the man who, acting, as I believe, from pure and disinterested motives, has, with untiring energy, by appeals to reason, enforced their necessity with an eloquence the more to be admired because it is unaffected and unadorned—the name which ought to be associated with the success of these measures is the name of Richard Cobden. Without scruple I attribute the success of these measures to him.”

Sir Robert concluded a memorable address, which was at once the apology and the justification of his public career, with an eloquent forecast of the future. “I shall leave office, I fear, with a name severely censured by many honourable gentlemen who, on public principle, deeply regret the severance of party ties, not from any interested or personal motives, but because they believe fidelity to party engagements—the existence and maintenance of a great party—to constitute a powerful instrument of government. I shall surrender power severely censured, I fear, by many honourable gentlemen who, from no interested motives, have adhered to the principle of Protection as important to the welfare and interest of the country. I shall leave a name execrated by every monopolist, who, from less honourable motives, clamours for Protection because it conduces to his own individual benefit; but it may be that I shall also leave a name sometimes remembered with expressions of goodwill in the abodes of those whose lot it is to labour and to earn their daily bread by the sweat of their brow, when they shall recruit their exhausted strength with abundant and untaxed food, the sweeter because it is no longer leavened by a sense of injustice.”

If one were writing a life of Sir Robert Peel, it would be

right that he should dwell at great length upon his political and moral qualities, upon the motives and justifications of his conduct in the four years, 1842-6, and upon his claims to statesmanship on this ground. But in the present volume all that is necessary is to regard the action of the Conservative Premier as influenced by and influencing the Free Traders, and as affecting the movement of which he constituted himself the instrument. From this point of view it may not be out of place to add a few words on the relations of Sir Robert Peel with the Liberal leaders in regard to the commercial legislation of the fifth decade of the century.

Lord John Russell and his Whig colleagues have been charged with ingratitude and self-seeking for the part which they took in the coercion debate, the result of which was to expel from office a generous rival whose aid they had so freely welcomed a few weeks before. No one, of course, could blame the Radical members, who were by principle and precedent opposed to coercive measures of government; and no one could blame Richard Cobden and others, who, though they had entered Parliament as simple Free Traders, expressly repudiating party allegiance, were still for the most part essentially Liberal in feeling, and free agents on every point which did not affect their main professions. But the Whig leaders had themselves more than once accepted the policy of coercion, and there can be little doubt that, if they had been in office at the time, they would have brought in a coercive measure. If everyone who could not conscientiously declare that he opposed coercion out of pure, invincible dislike to it, had abstained from voting against the Bill, Sir Robert would probably not have been defeated. Therefore there is ground for questioning the conduct of the Whigs—and much more of the Tories—who assisted the English and Irish Radicals on this occasion.

Of course there were some exceptional cases. Lord John Russell denied that he voted against the Protection of Life



Bill on the sole ground of Sir Robert Peel's change of opinion—though he maintained that this was, both by precedent and on sound political principles, an adequate reason for his dismissal from power. He claimed that he had acted from a strict regard to his convictions and opinions in the matter, believing it to be unjustifiable "to arrest men and put them in prison on the ground that they may be murderers and housebreakers." There is no reason to doubt the complete sincerity of this explanation; but, on the other hand, there is little reason to suppose that the majority as a whole was penetrated by the same sincerity.

The new Premier, in forming his Administration, made overtures to certain of the new middle party which had sprung into existence, and which was to have so large an influence on the future politics of England. He invited Lord Lincoln, Mr. Sidney Herbert, and Lord Dalhousie to accept office in his Cabinet; but they declined to do so. Nevertheless they promised him their support in all reasonable extensions of the policy of Free Trade, just as their leader had promised it in the preceding year, when for a fortnight he had resigned the Premiership. They were put to the test before the close of the session, when the new Premier proposed to admit foreign sugar on a moderate and gradually diminishing scale of duties. On this occasion Lord George Bentinck and Mr. Disraeli found as many as 130 followers who opposed the measure; but it was carried by a majority of more than two to one, and amongst the supporters of the Government were Sir Robert Peel, Mr. Goulburn, Lord Lincoln, and Mr. Sidney Herbert (Mr. Gladstone being still without a seat).

It was now, as Lord John Russell observes in commenting on the occurrences of the time, obvious that the progress of Free Trade would have the active support of Sir Robert Peel and his friends. "Sir Robert Peel," writes Lord John, "behaved to me and my Administration in the most fair and

honourable manner. Sir James Graham likewise gave his important and valuable support to the cause of Free Trade whenever its principles were in question. In 1848, on the proposal to repeal the Navigation Laws, which Adam Smith held ought to have been an exception to his theory, the speech of Sir James Graham was the best that was made for the repeal. In fact, Sir Robert Peel and his friends devoted all their energies to the promotion of Free Trade, and gave their handsome support to the Ministers who had now become the leaders and chiefs in that great cause."

This generous testimony to the loyal conduct of Peel and the Peelites, coming from the man who was best able to judge of their party and private motives, is a declaration which does honour to English statesmanship, and casts one of the brightest rays of light over the history of the Free Trade movement.





## CHAPTER XXII.

### THE DISSOLUTION OF THE LEAGUE.

THE Anti-Corn Law League had now done its work. The principle for which it had contended was adopted in its entirety by the leading statesmen of the day, and there could be no necessity for its continuance as an organisation. There were perhaps a few impracticable and uncompromising enthusiasts who thought that they ought not to be satisfied with the postponement of the complete measure of abolition for nearly three years, and that it was incumbent on them to struggle for this limited period as they had struggled for the main concession of principle. But that was not the opinion of the Council; and accordingly a meeting of the members was called on the 2nd of July, as soon as the Bill had received the royal assent, for the express purpose of dissolving the League.

This meeting, the full report of which is reproduced by Mr. Ashworth in his *Recollections of Cobden and the League*, to which we shall be indebted for the substance of the present chapter, was attended by some five hundred persons, including Messrs. Cobden, Bright, and Brotherton, members of Parliament, by all the chief officers, by Messrs. Rathbone, Pennington, P. A. Taylor, Jacob Bright, Cheetham, Thomasson,

Bazley, Edward Baines, Armitage, and others who have since had seats in the House, by Douglas Jerrold and other members from London and the provinces. The proceedings were marked by enthusiasm from beginning to end, and naturally the note of exultation is most conspicuous in the speeches and resolutions.

Cobden, who had undertaken to move the suspension of the League's operations—for that, rather than actual dissolution, was the course decided upon—delivered a long and characteristic address, in which his personal modesty, occasionally amounting to timidity, was as manifest as it had ever been in the earlier stages of his public career. The advice of the Council, he explained, was that the Executive should be left virtually constituted as a vigilant committee, with the understanding that, if they should at any time note a serious effort by the monopolists to revive Protection, or to induce Parliament to retrace its steps, they should call the League again into activity. The League, as an organisation, could scarcely be kept in existence. For three years past they had been spending a thousand pounds a week, and if they went on working they must spend five hundred pounds a week at the least. It was thought by some that the Protectionists would be encouraged by seeing them abandon the field; but he himself was of opinion that there was no danger of the kind. "I look upon it," said Cobden, "that the mere boasting and vapouring of a few of the less wise of the Protectionist party may be well excused by us. It is quite natural that men who feel worsted in an argument, and in all the tactics of political action during the last seven years, should console themselves with the promises of what they will do in the next seven years. But I hold that we may as soon expect to abolish Magna Charta, or do away with Trial by Jury, or with the Test and Corporation Repeal Acts, or the Catholic Emancipation Act, as ever to re-enact Protection as a principle again in this country. Some people say that

we occasionally go backwards in this country. I maintain that we never go back after a question has been discussed and sifted as ours has. Such being our position, we have very good grounds for congratulation on the present occasion. I confess, I hardly know whom to thank, or how to account for our present position ; there has been such a combination of fortunate accidents that I must confess that I am disposed to thank that Providence which has overruled so many apparently conflicting incidents for this great and mighty good. I believe, gentlemen, that we at all events may say that, humbly speaking, we owe a debt of gratitude to our gracious sovereign the Queen. I believe it is not in strict etiquette to allude to our Queen's personal views and feelings in any matter, but it is well known that Her Majesty's predilections are strongly in favour of the cause we have been agitating. Then there is her late first Minister. Well, gentlemen, along with our success we have seen the downfall of that Minister. Some people say he has lost his office by giving us Free Trade. Well, if he has lost office, he has gained a country. For my own part, I would rather descend into private life with that last measure of his, which led to his discomfiture, in my hand, than mount to the highest pinnacle of human power by any other means."

This was three days after Sir Robert Peel's handsome reference to Cobden in the House of Commons, and the latter was clearly anxious not to be outdone in generosity. To Lord John Russell, also, he acknowledged a debt of gratitude. "For myself," he said, "I believe we owe it to his individual firmness that we had the support of the Whig aristocracy at all in this measure. I am anxious on this occasion that I should lose sight of nobody to whom the country is indebted for the passing of these measures, because I feel that there has been a disposition to make one of us a great deal more a monopolist in this matter than he deserves. I speak of myself, and I say, that when I entered upon this career, I found

the road very much prepared ; mighty impediments had been removed by the labours of others ; there had been men preceding us who had been toiling to beat down great prejudices, and destroy great fallacies, and to prepare a path for us, which we had simply to macadamise in order to win our way to victory." The speaker went on to pay a tribute to the men who "in the privacy of their closets furnished the world with statistics, arguments, and facts, which, after all, had swayed mankind more than any declamation or appeals to the passions could do." In particular he asked his hearers not to forget Colonel Thompson, who had "made larger pecuniary sacrifices for Free Trade than any other man living," and whose contributions, in an intellectual point of view, had been invaluable to them.

Reverting to his own part in the movement, and after laying stress on the "moral and social" aspects of their work, to which, as we have seen, he had always attached the greatest importance, Cobden admitted that, so far as his personal tastes were concerned, a relief from a life of agitation would be welcome to him. "I ought," he said, "in order to enjoy the full pleasure of an agitator, to be differently constituted ; and I don't think nature ever intended me for that line. I say, most unaffectedly, that I entered upon the career of agitation without the slightest idea that it would ever conduct me to the point at which I have arrived. I had not the most distant idea of it. I don't think circumstances would have warranted me in taking the step eight years ago, if I could have seen what it would lead to. We got into the groove, and were pushed along, and we found ourselves carrying a train of good hardy spirits, who would not leave us ; and by their support we were impelled forward at an accelerated speed, and with constantly increased sympathy. Well, gentlemen, for myself, you will hardly credit it when I say I have precisely the same feeling now with respect to the ordeal of public

meetings that I had when I began this agitation. It is a matter of great reluctance and difficulty for me to appear before an audience at all. Many people would think that we all had our reward in the applause and *éclat* of public meetings; but I declare upon my honour that it is not so with me, for the inherent reluctance I have to address public meetings is so great that I don't even get up to present a petition to the House of Commons without reluctance. I therefore hope I may be believed when I say that, if this agitation terminates now, it will be very acceptable to my feelings; but if there should be in the future the same necessity, then the feeling which has impelled me to take the part I have done will equally impel me to a new agitation—ay, and with tenfold more vigour, after having had a little time to recruit my strength. Well, gentlemen, we are going to dissolve; those good spirits with whom I have associated must disband, and I am not quite sure that it is not wise and proper it should be so. We have been kept together for seven years without one single dispute, without anything to cause the slightest alienation. We have had the bond of freemasonry and brotherhood so closely knit about us that I don't think there has been a keen word in the happy family of the Anti-Corn Law League. Well, that is the spirit in which we should break off. Were we to continue our agitation when the object for which we were associated is gone, I am afraid that the demon of discord would be getting in among us. It is in nature so. It is morally necessary that, when an organised body has performed its functions, it must pass into a new state of existence, and become differently organised. We are dispersing our elements to be ready for any other good work, and it is nothing but good work that will be attempted by good Leaguers. Our body will (so to speak) perish, but our spirit is abroad, and will pervade all the nations of the earth. It will pervade all the nations of the earth, because

it is the spirit of truth and justice, because it is the spirit of peace and goodwill amongst men. I move, 'That an Act of Parliament having been passed providing for the abolition of the Corn Law in February 1849, it is deemed expedient to suspend the active operations of the Anti-Corn Law League; and the Executive Council in Manchester is hereby requested to take the necessary steps for making-up and closing the affairs of the League with as little delay as possible.'

This resolution was seconded by Mr. Bright in a speech of great power, wherein he took a broad and prospective view of the change which had come over the commercial and political aspect of the country. One or two passages of his eloquent address are well worth quoting:—

"This Anti-Corn Law League will henceforth stand before the world as the sign of a new order of things. Until now, this country has been ruled by the class of great proprietors of the soil. Every one must have foreseen that, as trade and manufactures extended, the balance of power would, at some time or other, be thrown into another scale. Well, that time has come, and the rising of this League seven years ago was sufficient to have pointed out to any statesman that the power of the landed aristocracy had reached its height, and that henceforth it would find a rival to which eventually it must become subjected. We have been living through a revolution without knowing it. In 1833 the House of Lords deemed itself a power in the State, irresponsible except to heaven, and able to say absolutely whether a law should pass or not. The House of Lords now make no such pretensions. Lord Stanley declared—'God forbid that your lordships should set yourselves against the clearly-expressed will of the people.' . . . I said we have been living in a revolution, and I am prepared to maintain it. Not such a revolution as that which we were charged with wishing to make. We all recollect the seditions, the conspiracies, and the ulterior objects—the democracy, the revolution, the destruction of property, and all the other things which were laid to the charge of this National Anti-Corn Law League. I put it to the meeting—Is the Crown less popular now than it was seven years ago? Is not the Queen as safe in the occupation of her throne, without any aspirant, without any one to envy or to slander her, as she ever was at any time? Even the House of Lords itself, I believe, stands at this



moment infinitely better in the respect and affections of the people than it has done for many years. We don't look at the House of Lords now as a body which is either ignorantly or wickedly maintaining a law which we believe to be unjust to millions of the people. We look upon it as a House tending—unfortunately sometimes too much—to moderate the legislation of another House, which nobody, I think, will contend goes on too fast for us; but I must confess that I have a greater respect for the House of Lords, from watching their passing of this Bill, and the manner in which they have passed it, than I ever had at any former period. And of the House of Commons also we may have a better opinion; for notwithstanding we had so few votes before the Peel conversion, yet there can be no doubt that a very large number, almost every one of the men who have come round with Sir R. Peel, had been before wholly or partially convinced of the necessity for the measures which he has introduced, and were only prevented from helping us because they were bound in by those fetters of party by which so much good is often prevented, and I must say also by which so much good is often accomplished. I believe this country also is in a much better position now than it was when our agitation commenced, because I believe the effect of all our writing and speaking has been to create a greater reverence for law—not for bad law, but for justice; for we have taught that justice between man and man is really the principle on which legislation ought to take place. . . . If we have not been mistaken during the seven years we have worked, if we are not mistaken now—and I think I may say for all who have been working in this cause that we not only do not believe that we are mistaken, but we are confirmed in our conviction that we shall find the result of this measure in extended freedom and increased security, not only for property, but for labour, and for the rewards and enjoyments which are procured by labour; and I trust and believe—I speak conscientiously, and after years of consideration—I believe that we have cleared away the greatest obstacle in the path of the people; that we now stand on the threshold of a new career; and that if the spirit, the energy and the intelligence, the great and noble qualities of which we boast ourselves the possessors, and which to some extent have been exhibited in the working of this League—if we still bring those qualities into action, I know not that there is any height to which this nation may not aspire; and I know not but that in all good things we may lead forward other nations on the same career.”

The enthusiastic reception of this peroration was a mark, not of boasting or self-flattery, but of earnest aspiration and

confidence; and assuredly Mr. Bright's forecast has been amply justified in the strides made by the English people, as a commercial and as a civilising nation, since the year 1846. Of the advances which have been made, and of the efficiency or failure of our example to carry other nations along with us, something may be said in a future chapter.

On the understanding already mentioned, the League was practically dissolved. Only fifty thousand pounds of the quarter-of-a-million fund were called in; and, from the balance in the hands of the treasurer, a sum of ten thousand pounds was voted to Mr. George Wilson, who had acted as Chairman of the Council, and had attended no fewer than 1361 of its meetings. The Executive were presented by the members of the League with complimentary memorials of gratitude for their "high-principled, laborious, and most successful exertions."

The great services which Cobden had rendered to the Anti-Corn Law League had entailed on himself considerable sacrifices. He had, previous to the establishment of the League, opened for himself a prosperous business career, which would doubtless have ensured for him a competence or a fortune if he had not been compelled by his public duties to neglect it. Mr. Ashworth tells us that in September 1845, Mr. Edmund Potter and Mr. Thomas Hunter, two of Mr. Cobden's friends, conferred with him (Mr. Ashworth) with the view of advising Cobden to retire from Parliament, that he might devote his whole attention to his business, which had suffered so much by his continued absence as to cause great anxiety to his friends as well as to himself. "He had, some time previously, retired from the partnership with Mr. Sheriff and Mr. Foster, and had removed to the Print Works at Cross Hall; and he had entrusted the practical management of the business to two of his brothers, who were comparatively inexperienced in the trade, and hence came his pecuniary troubles. At a second meeting on

this matter Mr. Cobden was present, but no decision was then arrived at. Just at this time the country was thrown into a state of alarm at the prevalence of the potato disease in Ireland; and at such a crisis our sympathies, as well as our patriotic feelings, became awakened to the vital importance of maintaining Mr. Cobden's position and influence in Parliament. The assurances and advice of a small circle of friends removed all anxiety from his mind, and he at once re-entered with alacrity and confidence upon his mission."

The result was a subscription on Cobden's behalf, which reached the large amount of—in round numbers—£76,760. Of this sum upwards of £40,000 was contributed in Lancashire alone, Manchester providing £25,000 and Liverpool £8000, whilst the London subscription reached £11,760. Cobden wrote a note of acknowledgment to the subscribers (dated May 1848), wherein, after warmly recognising the hearty character of the gift, he proceeded to explain the manner in which he viewed and accepted it. "Whilst acknowledging," he said, "that it is by your bounty alone I am placed in a position to be able to devote myself to public business, I think it fair to guard you from being held responsible for my future career. I accept the testimonial at your hands with the understanding that it commits the donors to an approval of my Free Trade principles only, and that it leaves you at liberty to take an unfettered course on all other public questions. Having secured my independence, you have a right to expect that, in all matters affecting the public interests, I shall act up to the dictates of a conscientious conviction—that I shall not become the slave of a party, the parasite of the great, or the flatterer of the people; and in these expectations you shall not be disappointed. Happy indeed shall I be to find that my opinions generally have the sanction of your approbation. I have entered upon this explanation solely to prevent any attempt hereafter to place you in a false position for want of

a frank understanding upon our future political relationship. Let it not be thought for a moment that this candour is incompatible with the most profound and grateful sense of your generosity. I feel an inexpressible pride in owing my fortune to the spontaneous contributions of my countrymen."

Most unfortunately for himself, and for the independence of his public position, Cobden invested and lost a considerable portion of this money in American railway speculations; so that, some eleven years later, his circumstances were again embarrassed. Another and a more private subscription was made for him by his friends in 1860, chiefly in Lancashire, Glasgow, and Birmingham, which yielded forty thousand pounds. Of course there were ill-natured tongues which found something to say on the subject of this second subscription, and perhaps the fact must be regarded as having interfered to some extent with Cobden's influence for good in his latter years. But the least that can be said is that Cobden's friends were hearty and spontaneous in their action; and that services such as he had rendered to his country are not to be measured by gold. A general who wins a great battle is often rewarded by a Parliamentary vote and an appropriation of public money. Cobden had won a victory full of honour and advantage. He received no national recognition of his services; and the money which he did receive was that of eager volunteers, not of occasionally grudging taxpayers.





## CHAPTER XXIII.

### THE LEAGUE REVIVED.

THE foresight of those who had provided for the resumption of the Manchester organisation in case of need was justified in the year 1852, when the Executive Council of the League found it necessary to summon the members together, with a view to re-establishing the organisation. The Derby-Disraeli Administration, which came into power in February of the above-mentioned year, on the resignation of Lord John Russell, threatened to resort to a Protectionist policy; and the danger appeared to some of the Free Trade leaders to be sufficiently great to warrant them in at once renewing their activity. Every indication was given that the spirit of 1846 would be revived in all its intensity; subscriptions were promised to the amount of £70,000; and preparations were made for a fresh campaign. A large and enthusiastic meeting was held in Manchester, at which most of the old leaders were present, and Cobden made a speech equal, if not superior, to any of his former efforts in the argumentative style. Referring to the proofs which had already been afforded of the benefits of the new system, he said:—"I solemnly declare for myself, that in the most exaggerated flights of

fancy, I never expected so great a result from the labours of the League as has been witnessed during the last four years. Take for instance a single fact, which comprises almost our main case. Since the day when we laid down our arms there has been imported into this country, in grain and flour of all kinds, an amount of human subsistence equal to upwards of 50,000,000 of quarters of grain—a larger quantity than had been imported from the foreign countries during the thirty-one years preceding 1846, that is, from the Peace of 1815 down to the time at which we brought our labours to a close. Now, gentlemen, in that one fact is comprised our case. You have had, at the lowest computation, 5,000,000 of your countrymen, or countrywomen, or children, subsisting on the corn that has been brought from foreign countries. And what does that say? What does it say of the peace and prosperity and serenity of domestic life in those houses, where 50,000,000 of quarters of grain extra have been introduced, and where, but for your exertions, the inmates might have been left either in helpless penury or subsisting on potatoes? But I need not go into statistics to show what the beneficial consequences have been; you may see for yourselves your triumph in the nation's eyes, you may read it in the countenances of the people of all classes, you may trace it in their improved clothing and in their improved habits—you may see it in the diminished pauperism and crime throughout the whole country. You may see it in every aspect in which you can test, as touching the pulse of society, the condition of the great mass of the people. Well, gentlemen, if we have done so much, what have we averted? How much of pain and anguish lies behind the privations which the mass of the people must have suffered, if it had not been for your triumph? How much of vice and crime, and consequent misery, must have pervaded the great mass of the people, if they had been kept in the state of destitution and privation in which they

must have been, but for the introduction of this great amount of human subsistence? These, then, are our reasons, and they are surely a sufficient justification for renewing the effort to maintain the ground which we have achieved, assuming that we confine ourselves to the one question we have in hand, as we did before."

There were some of the old Free Traders who urged that they should take advantage of the renewal of the former organisation to work for other political ends—such, for instance, as a comprehensive Parliamentary reform. Cobden strongly dissuaded them from this course, believing amongst other things that the Conservative Government would, if they could secure a majority, or if they could contrive it without a majority, give them plenty of work to do in the simple defence of their conquered positions. He advised them at once to memorialise the Queen for a dissolution of Parliament, and to fight out the battle at the polls. "I want," he said, "to bring this question to a definite issue, without its being mixed up with any other questions. We have not only friends amongst us who wish to blend other questions with ours, by which as I think we might materially damage our cause, and probably altogether sacrifice it; but our enemies will play the same game, for it is their only chance. Leave this question in suspense during the whole session of Parliament, and what will be the result? In the first place, we all know from experience that it is not very easy to keep popular enthusiasm for any extended period in that high and fervid state to which you can probably bring it in the course of a few weeks; you cannot possibly keep it up for a number of months. But whilst your enthusiasm may be cooling, your enemies will be practising their arts of deception and misrepresentation; and one of those arts will be to try and mix up other questions with this, and, if possible, to thrust some other question before it. Already I see the enemy hoisting the

flag, and trying to raise up the banner of intolerance in religion, so that you may have the questions of Protestantism and Popery thrust before the bread-tax. It is the old thing over again; your enemies will try to be religious; *they* will pretend to be the only religious part of the community; *they*, who tax the people's bread, will profess to be the great champions of religion. You know, in olden times, they that 'devoured widows' houses made long prayers for a pretence.' And you will have infidelity, Popery, and all sorts of charges held out against you, if by that means our opponents can change the issue from Free Trade to some other question. I should not wonder if they even tried to raise the issue of the monarchy itself! You in Lancashire will be denounced by these bread-taxers as being enemies of the monarchy and promoters of revolution. I should not be surprised at any charge that may be brought against you, with a view to divert attention from this question, if you will only give your enemies time. Now, I say, give them no time; let this question of the Corn Law occupy the front rank; let this be the only question for those who think that it can be settled, by one effort more, in the course of the next three months; let this question take precedence of all that the enemy can bring to baffle and confuse you; and then you will soon bring it to a successful issue. But I am told that we must allow the Protectionists to remain in office for twelve months, because that will give them the opportunity of abandoning all their professions and principles, and of cheating their friends. Now, I tell you candidly, I do not believe Lord Derby and his colleagues are one-half so base as these advisers take them to be. What! the men who hunted that illustrious statesman (Sir Robert Peel) almost to his grave, for having abolished the Corn Law—whose sole political capital, from that time to this, has been the sarcasms and obloquy with which they have covered his name and fame, and the abuse and denuncia-



tions with which they have loaded the gentlemen of the Manchester School—are these men going to do, not what Sir Robert Peel did, but ten times worse! Are we now to believe that Lord Derby and his colleagues are coming into office simply and solely that they may immediately get rid of the principles which they have hitherto advocated, and which they have denounced their former leader for having abandoned? I say I do not believe it. I believe that such a thing would show that we have fallen into a lower status of political morality than it is alleged they now have in France. I, on the contrary, believe the Ministry to be sincere in their professions. I believe they come into office with a view to carrying out those professions. But are you going to allow them to remain in office, to be sharpening their weapons in order that they may stab you when they find you off your guard?"

Cobden proved himself to the last the shrewd and effective master of the great movement which he had initiated. He saw that one more stroke might be needed in order to kill the scorched snake, but that one only would be sufficient. The prescience of the following passage has been amply attested by the political records of the past quarter of a century:—"You manufacturers and merchants, and our shipowners and colonists, all require to know how and when this thing is to be finally settled; for you and they want to enter into transactions extending over a year or two years; in fact, all the wages and profits of this empire are bound up in this question. When this question is settled, the Protectionist party will disappear. You will have one dissolution on this question, and then you will never find a politician tying to his tail the tin kettle of Protection afterwards. They are all anxious to get rid of it, no doubt; and when you have abolished the Protectionist party, it will not be so difficult to manage the business of the House of Commons. The whole of the difficulties have arisen from the

fact that you have had 200 or 230 gentlemen bound together apparently with the most intense self-interest, and with the determination to upset any Government that did not consult their interests. This party, led on by a gentleman who, I think, has at all times shown himself to be a tactician, who is willing to take all advantages, you have seen constantly upsetting the Whig Government; and why? Because they have believed that upsetting the Whigs was the necessary preliminary to the accession of the Protectionist party to power. And the great difficulty in carrying on the Government has been found from the existence of this, the most compact body in the House of Commons, led on by the gentleman who is now their Chancellor of the Exchequer. But, I say, if a dissolution abolishes that Protectionist party, you will no longer be in the same difficulty, you will no longer have these attempts to trip up the Government. Only put these Protectionists out of the way, and, after a dissolution shall have settled this question, you will never again have a party in Parliament founded on the principle of Protection; you will no longer have some people claiming merit for being Free Traders, for all will be Free Traders; and the politicians who have been hitherto, perhaps, getting a little popularity by declaiming against Free Trade, will have to take in a reef of their sail, or to go on a new tack altogether; and I have some confidence that the Protectionist leaders, when they find they have no longer Protection to talk about, will find something else, something intelligible, useful, and patriotic, to talk about instead, and which we may be quite as much interested in carrying as they are."

The subscription list on this occasion showed that the policy of Free Trade had already approved itself to the general body of the manufacturers throughout the kingdom. Though the most practical supporters of the movement were still to be found mainly in the north or north-west of England, the area represented by the largest subscriptions was

wider than it had been six or eight years before, and Manchester no longer bore a specially great share of the self-imposed burden—though it still did more than any other single town.

The League found plenty of work to do. Parliament was dissolved in July, and at the general election which followed the question of Free Trade against Protection was made one of the principal tests of fitness in a candidate. There was considerable vagueness in the minds of all who took part in the elections as to the real intentions or desires of the outgoing Ministry, and this vagueness was probably due to the uncertainty of the Conservative leaders themselves as to what they could, or would be permitted to do if returned to power. The utterances of Lord Derby and Mr. Disraeli in the previous session had been tentative and undecided, though they had said quite enough to prove that they regarded the restoration of Protection as more or less an open question. In fact, the interpretation which ought to be put upon their past observations appeared to depend upon the verdict of the country at the polls. If this should be favourable to the Ministry, there would have been ample ground for saying that the constituencies had declared for at least a partial return to the protective tariffs, whereas if the verdict should be unfavourable, there would be just as ample ground for maintaining that no one had ever dreamed of going back from Free Trade. The speeches of prominent Conservatives on the hustings tended to maintain this double aspect of the case. Thus, at the nomination for Buckinghamshire, where Mr. Disraeli was a candidate, he said: "We have been taunted to-day with the question, 'Are you a Free Trader, or are you not?' I am almost surprised that the big and the little loaf did not appear in the procession of the gentlemen opposite. The time has gone by when *these exploded politics* could interest the people of this country. No one supposes that the present Administration

has any intention, or ever had any intention, to bring back the laws that were repealed in 1846."

This might have been thought sufficiently definite. But other late Ministers and leading Conservatives said just the opposite at the same time. Lord John Manners, Mr. Walpole, Mr. Christopher, and Lord Granby declared their belief that Lord Derby intended to restore Protection. As Macaulay afterwards said, "not only did they suit their language to town or county constituencies, but individual candidates were seen from the same reason to change all their former professions. Lord Maidstone, a vehement Protectionist, adopted the policy of Sir Robert Peel when standing for Westminster; while Sir Fitzroy Kelly, Peel's Solicitor-General, made a speech at East Suffolk which might have been composed out of Lord Maidstone's hexameters. The one forgot his votes, the other his verse."\*

The contest was severe throughout the country, but the Ministry were beaten by a majority of thirty-three (Liberals and Peelites being counted against them). Most of the candidates who came forward distinctly as Free Traders were elected—Cobden being returned without a contest for the West Riding of Yorkshire. The League celebrated the victory of its principles by a meeting at Manchester, which was attended by no fewer than seventy-nine members of Parliament. This was on the 2nd of November, four months after the dissolution; and on the 4th of the same month the new House of Commons assembled for its first session. The Queen's Speech and the declarations of Ministers—Lord Derby and his colleagues deciding to wait for an adverse vote—clearly accepted the decision of the country in regard to Free Trade, and thus virtually admitted that the resumption of a Protective policy had, after all, been contemplated in some form or another. The Speech congratulated Parlia-

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\* Irving, July 22nd.

ment on the improved condition of the working classes, and said: "If you should be of opinion that recent legislation, in contributing with other causes to this happy result, has at the same time inflicted unavoidable injury on certain important interests, I recommend you dispassionately to consider how far it may be practicable equitably to mitigate that injury, and to enable the industry of the country to meet successfully that unrestricted competition to which Parliament in its wisdom has decided that it should be subjected."

Even this was a challenge to the Free Traders which they were hardly likely to pass over; but Lord Derby in the House of Lords definitely abandoned all idea of compromising the principles of 1846. He bowed to the decision of the country, and declared on the part of himself and his colleagues that, whilst they desired to "mitigate that unavoidable injury which the adoption of the policy" of Free Trade "had inflicted, and must inflict upon important classes," they did not adopt the said policy with any reserve. "I adopt it frankly," said the Premier, "as the decision of the country, and honestly and fairly I am prepared to carry it out as the decision of the country." Mr. Disraeli declared the intention of the Government to be an adjustment of the financial system in harmony with the new commercial system—which seemed to point to a further relief of the landed interests in the matter of local taxation; and at any rate it was manifest that the Cabinet thought some sort of compensation (though they avoided the word) was due to the owners of land.

The Free Traders took early occasion to insist on a more complete recognition of their principles. On the 23rd of November Mr. Villiers moved three resolutions, declaring that the improved condition of the country was "mainly the result of recent commercial legislation, and especially of the Act of 1846; that the maintenance and further extension of the policy of Free Trade, as opposed to that of Pro-

tection, would best enable the property and industry of the country to bear the burdens to which they were exposed; and that the House would take into consideration any measure which the Ministry might bring forward consistent with these principles. The Government interpreted these resolutions as implying want of confidence, and Lord Palmerston consequently moved as an amendment, "That it is the opinion of this House that the policy of unrestricted competition, firmly maintained and prudently extended, will best enable the industry of the country to bear its burdens, and will thereby most surely promote the welfare and contentment of the people; and that the House will be ready to take into consideration any measures consistent with these principles which, in pursuance of Her Majesty's gracious speech and recommendation, may be laid before it." Mr. Villiers persisted with his motion, which was rejected by 20 votes in a House of 490. Lord Palmerston's amendment, having the support of the Ministerialists, was then carried by 468 to 53—the minority consisting exclusively of the irreconcilable Protectionists.

Mr. Disraeli soon afterwards introduced an elaborate Budget, slightly reducing some duties, and increasing or imposing others. His proposals were objected to by the Free Traders as unsound, and after a five days' debate, in which Mr. Gladstone and others effectively pulled them to pieces, the Government was defeated by a ~~majority~~ of 19. The result was ~~that Lord Derby resigned~~, and the Earl of Aberdeen was charged with the formation of a Ministry. The former complained that he had been defeated by an "unprincipled combination" in the Lower House, stigmatising in this manner the coalition between the Liberals and the Peelites; and Mr. Disraeli had already, in the final night of the Budget debate, appealed "from the coalition to that public opinion which governs the country." No doubt the exasperation of the Tory leaders at this combination was

very great, but it was only natural that men who were entirely at one upon the leading and central principle of the time should fall into the same ranks against its virtual, if not its open, opponents.

Lord Aberdeen, explaining to his fellow-peers the circumstances under which he had accepted office, announced that "the mission of the Government" at home would be "to maintain and extend Free Trade principles, and to pursue the commercial and financial system of the late Sir Robert Peel." It is needless to say that if Sir Robert Peel had been alive he would now have been Premier of the Coalition Cabinet, after less than six years of exclusion from office. And probably his Administration would have been formed in much the same manner—with Lords John Russell and Palmerston amongst his Secretaries of State, with Mr. Gladstone as Chancellor of the Exchequer, with Whigs like Lords Granville, Argyle, and Lansdowne, and with others of his former colleagues high in office, like the Duke of Newcastle, Sir James Graham, and Mr. Sidney Herbert.

From this moment, it may be said that Sir Robert Peel's conduct was finally approved and justified; that Free Trade was definitely established as the national commercial policy of England, and that Protection was dead, past all resurrection. The fact was signalled by the monopolists themselves; for, early in the year 1853, the "National Association for the Protection of British Industry," of which the Duke of Richmond was the head, was dissolved by its own patrons.





## CHAPTER XXIV.

### INTERNATIONAL PRINCIPLES.

THE principles which underlie the system of Free Trade, as applied to tariffs of import and export duties, do not end there. They pass beyond the limits of mere commerce, and are found to govern the international relations of each country with all the rest. It is something more than an accident which has turned the attention of mankind to international questions of every description in the same age that established freedom of commerce in the most enlightened nations. It is something more than an accident that the Corn Laws were abolished in 1846, that the Navigation Laws were modified in 1849, that about the same time the sympathy between free and struggling nations became more pronounced and effectual, that the advocates of arbitration in place of war began to speak out more boldly and to make a larger number of converts, and that one commercial treaty after another has strengthened the peaceful bonds between people and people.

We have seen reason to conclude, in the foregoing chapters, that Richard Cobden was more than a simple Manchester merchant, struggling for manufacturing interests against monopolists. He was more than a man of one idea,



who set his mind on sweeping away prohibitory and protective duties. He was, in short, a Statesman; and the spirit of his statesmanship was that of freedom in the relations of communities, on the same grounds and for the same objects as in the case of the individual frequenters of markets. Free trade—free commerce—free communion in the channels appointed by nature, with no restraints except those which society finds it absolutely necessary to impose; these were the doctrines which in his later years Richard Cobden never ceased to expound, both by action and by word.

It was only the legitimate development of his earlier convictions that he should have been so thoroughly sceptical of the advantages of war in any case. He associated himself with Mr. Henry Richard and the Peace Society, and protested\* against the Crimean War with considerable force, arguing, like his friend John Bright, that our quarrel with Russia on this occasion was needless and unjustifiable. He protested against the policy of many of our representatives in the Anglo-Indian Government, especially in the seeking of pretexts for wars with the native races. He protested strongly against our treatment of China, and particularly in 1857, when Lord Palmerston hurried us into a wanton war with that country. His outspoken opposition to the Premier at this time cost him his seat in Parliament—he being defeated at Huddersfield in 1857, at the same time that Mr. Bright and Mr. Gibson were defeated at Manchester. One of his earliest acts in the House of Commons after the close of the Free Trade movement was to bring forward a motion in favour of a scheme for settling international disputes by arbitration. He was too much in advance of his age to have a chance of succeeding in such a motion as this, but he carried as many as seventy-nine members with him.

His strong aspiration for international goodwill, and for

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\* In a pamphlet, entitled "1793 and 1853."

the sympathetic agreement of free peoples, led him to take a deep interest in the popular movements of 1848, and especially in the case of France. But he was not one of those who believed that England had anything to gain by the revolutionary method. He held that victories like that of 1846 were worth more than the victories of 1848; and he had as much reason for satisfaction in the latter year as Sir Robert Peel—of whom it is related that, “when the news reached London of the downfall of Louis Philippe, and was brought to the House of Commons, he crossed the floor of the House to the late Mr. Joseph Hume, and said, ‘This is what would have happened in England if I had not repealed the Corn Laws.’” \* Cobden’s instincts in this, as in all kindred questions, were well expressed in one of the pithy sentences which have been adopted as proverbial maxims in English political life: “As little intercourse as possible between the *Governments*, as much connection as possible between the *nations* of the world.” The excellence of the relations between any two States, in his opinion, would be in direct proportion with the non-intervention of the rulers and the unfettered intercommunication of merchants, travellers, men of letters, and traffickers of every legitimate description. His attachment to the general principle of non-intervention was exemplified at the time of the absorption of Schleswig-Holstein by Germany, when he warmly opposed the advice which was in some quarters being pressed upon the English Government, to go to war with Germany on the strength of an old treaty guaranteeing the integrity of Denmark. Cobden did not take the ground of the majority, that we were absolved from our guarantee by the refusal of other Powers to interfere; but he maintained that we could not be justified in aiding the Danish Government,

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\* The story is related by Mr. Thorold Rogers, on the authority of Cobden himself.

when the German population of the Duchy were in favour of union with the bulk of their race.

It has been mentioned that Cobden heartily co-operated in the amendment of the Navigation Laws, which was effected by Lord John Russell's Government in 1849. On this question, as on the cognate one of the neutralisation of private property at sea, he recognised the natural development of the theory of Free Trade, and especially of that fundamental maxim of Adam Smith's, that the true basis of national prosperity was to interfere as little as possible with the industry and enterprise of individuals. The essence of the Navigation Law Amendment Act was to repeal the statutes which required that English goods should be carried in English ships, and thus to throw open the general carrying trade to competition. After a Parliamentary struggle of some severity, an exception was made in regard to the coasting trade, and the trade between Great Britain and the colonies, which was still to be confined to British vessels. A great outcry was made at the time by shippers, and by the yet unabashed advocates of Protection, who could not persuade themselves that the apparent sacrifice of trade would result in a real advantage. Referring to this measure, Lord John Russell mentions that Lord Derby predicted that it "would utterly ruin the merchant shipping of England. An English shipbuilder, who had defended with perseverance the monopoly of England, showed his spirit by immediately ordering the building of twelve new ships for the mercantile marine."

In 1859 the United States, with the concurrence of France and Russia, invited England to agree to an international regulation by which private property at sea should be free from capture by the armed vessels of belligerent Powers. Cobden was eager in support of this view, as also of the views urged from the same quarter, that privateering, and the blockade of commercial ports, should be abandoned.

The English Government would not consent to either of these proposals; but the principles involved in them have made much progress since that time, and have been to some extent adopted. Cobden wrote a letter on the subject which is printed amongst his collected works, in which he argued for—“(1.) The exemption of private property from capture at sea during war, by armed vessels of every kind. (2.) Blockades to be restricted to naval arsenals, and to towns besieged at the same time by land, with the exception of articles contraband of war. (3.) The merchant ships of neutrals on the high seas to be inviolable to the visitation of alien Government vessels in time of war as in time of peace.” And he added: “I regard these changes as the necessary corollary of the repeal of the Navigation Laws, the repeal of the Corn Laws, and the abandonment of our colonial monopoly. We have thrown away the sceptre of force to confide in the principle of freedom—uncovenanted, unconditional freedom.”

Mr. Thorold Rogers, commenting on these ideas of Cobden in a volume published in 1873,\* writes:—“As the British Government declined to accept the beneficent suggestions of the American Government, America on its side declined to give up, as the parties to the Congress of Paris did, the practice of privateering, with what effects they and we know too well; they in the enormous losses inflicted on their shipping by the Southern privateers, we in the escape of the Alabama and her companions, in the irritation caused by these events, and by the disgrace and loss which have come upon us and our administration. We are, however, I presume, wiser now. . . . It is, I believe, pretty generally known that after the proposals made by Mr. Cass in 1859, Lord Palmerston was not indisposed to renew the negotiations on the subject, and that there was actually some pro-

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\* *Cobden and Political Opinion*, p. 143.

gress made towards fulfilling the suggestion of Cobden and the original propositions of the American Government. It is not said, indeed, that Lord Palmerston was particularly keen on carrying the matter forward. But, in the meantime, the situation in America changed. Long before the election of November 1860, it became apparent that the Union was drifting into civil war, or at least that the South would seek to vindicate their meditated secession by force of arms. . . . To the South, blockade-running and privateering were the most important means of defence and aggression. It was believed that foreign nations, depending on them for a cotton supply, would effect the former, and that the South could inflict the greatest possible harm on the North by resorting to the latter expedient. Hence it is currently reported that Mr. Dallas was instructed to let the matter drop, with what effects we know too well."

The blockade-running did not, however, suffice to prevent the Lancashire cotton famine; but the indirect encouragement of privateering by England led to the costly award of Geneva. Cobden did not live to see the result of our folly and neglect, but there can be no doubt that he would have freely and warmly approved the submission of the Alabama case to arbitration, and the cheerful payment of the indemnity. Arbitration on such a matter was as entirely in harmony with his principles as the measures and precautions which would have prevented its necessity. The wealth, industry, freedom, and rapid development of the United States, naturally commanded his sympathies, and he had great hopes that the Republican Government would ultimately adopt the Free Trade policy in its widest interpretation, to the immense benefit of its own people and of those with whom they chiefly traded. Even after the severe disappointment which he experienced in his unfortunate investments in American railways, he continued to feel unbounded confidence in the enormous advance which the country was destined to make.

On one occasion, speaking to the Reform Association at Rochdale, which town he had represented since his defeat at Huddersfield in 1857, he raised a protest against the ignorance which Englishmen frequently displayed of American geography and institutions. This was during the continuance of the civil war between the North and South, when the language of prejudice, often springing from ignorance, was commonly heard amongst us. Cobden affirmed that, if he were a rich man, he would endow a chair at Oxford or Cambridge to instruct the undergraduates in American history. He undertook to say that he would take any undergraduate at Oxford or Cambridge, and bring him a map of the United States, and ask him to put his finger on Chicago, and he would not go within a thousand miles of it. Yet Chicago was a place of 150,000 inhabitants, from which one or two millions of people in our own country are annually fed. There was a little outcry against the speaker for imputing such ignorance; but of those who read his words, not only at the Universities but in England generally, perhaps a very large proportion were compelled to admit that they could scarcely stand the test.

During the nearly twenty years of Richard Cobden's life that followed the repeal of the Corn Laws, he rarely missed an opportunity of raising his voice in favour of international goodwill, justice, and community of peaceful interests. It has been mentioned that he made an outspoken protest in 1853-4 against the adoption, by Lord Aberdeen's Government, of a hostile attitude towards Russia, whereby the Crimean War was brought about without (in his opinion) any sufficient justification for so grave a resolution. In 1857 he caused the overthrow of Lord Palmerston's first Administration by his motion on the Chinese quarrel, arising out of the forcing of English trade upon China, and the hostile vindication of doubtful British interests. The true character of the quarrel, and the reasons which impelled

Cobden to attack the Whig Government on this occasion, were (strange to say) explained with the greatest clearness by Lord Derby in the Upper House, when he appealed to his fellow-peers that they would not sanction the usurpation by our officials, or representatives in foreign countries, of the royal prerogative of making war; "that they would not tolerate, nor by their silence appear to approve . . . the capture of commercial vessels . . . the destruction of the forts of a friendly country . . . the bombardment and the shelling of an undefended and commercial city . . . the shedding of the blood of unwarlike and innocent people without warrant of law, without moral justification." Notwithstanding Lord Derby's appeal, the Lords gave a majority for Government; but in the House of Commons the result was different.

Cobden moved the House to declare that it had heard with concern of the conflicts which had taken place in the Canton river; "and that, without expressing an opinion as to the extent to which the Government of China may have afforded this country cause of complaint respecting the non-fulfilment of the treaty of 1842, this House considers that the papers which have been laid upon the table fail to establish satisfactory grounds for the violent measures resorted to at Canton in the late affair of the 'Arrow;' and that a Select Committee be appointed to inquire into the state of our commercial relations with China." Cobden made a very effective speech, and clearly pointed out the violations of sound international principles of which our representatives had been guilty. It was not, he thought, for the benefit of our traders that they "should be able to summon an overwhelming force to their aid." "There might be too much protection for British merchants as well as for British agriculture. '*Civis Romanus sum*' was not a very conciliatory motto to put over counting-houses abroad."

The debate extended over four nights, and resulted in

the defeat of the Government by fourteen votes. Amongst the majority were twenty-two members classed as Peelites, including Mr. Gladstone, Sir James Graham, Mr. Milner Gibson, and most of their political associates. Lord Palmerston soon afterwards dissolved Parliament, and on an appeal to the country secured a modified sanction for his general policy. The constituencies did not like the appearance of a Peelite coalition with the Tories—though the recent majority had contained thirty-five professed English and Scotch Liberals and ten Irish Liberals. Cobden, amongst others, lost his seat, but Rochdale soon returned him to the House of Commons. He had protested during the debate that neither he nor any of his friends was party to a conspiracy to drive the Ministry from office; but he added that he had never known a change of Government on a matter of principle from which the people had not derived advantage.

It will be readily understood that the spirit and foreign policy of Lord Palmerston's Administration were little to the taste of Cobden; and indeed there seems to have been scant sympathy between the two men. In 1855, during the progress of the Crimean War, Lord Palmerston, then Home Secretary, made a sharp attack on Cobden as a "peace-at-any-price" man, accusing him of giving way to passion, and of being qualified for a lunatic asylum.

The most memorable development of international principles, founded upon the commercial relations of State with State, was effected in the conclusion of the French Commercial Treaty. This crowning achievement of the Free Trade movement, with which the name of Richard Cobden is honourably associated, may form the subject of a separate chapter.





## CHAPTER XXV.

### THE FRENCH COMMERCIAL TREATY.

EARLY in January 1860, the French Emperor informed the English Government of his willingness to conclude a treaty of commerce, whereby the two nations should grant each other reciprocal privileges, by a reduction of duties mutually favourable to the trade of both countries. No doubt the Emperor had a sincere desire, in his adoption of Free Trade, to liberate his own subjects, as he professed, from commercial restrictions, but he was also actuated by a wish to ingratiate himself with England, and to overcome the animosity between Englishmen and Frenchmen which too frequently found expression in the public prints. The result showed that he had reasoned shrewdly and soundly, and the English Government on its part was not loth to fall in with his views.

Cobden was appointed plenipotentiary of England for the carrying on of the necessary negotiations; and the circumstances of this appointment were honourable alike to him and to the Government. In June 1859, Lord Palmerston had resumed office, after the temporary banishment due to his Conspiracy to Murder Bill. Mr. Gladstone was his Chancellor of the Exchequer, and there were other former

Peclites in the Cabinet; and it was only a just recognition of Cobden's great services to the cause of Free Trade that he should now be offered a position of dignity and responsibility under the Crown. The first offer made to him was the post of President of the Board of Trade, to which he had been nominated by the Premier when he was forming his Administration in 1859. But Cobden, who neither desired nor expected office, and who was travelling on the Continent when more ambitious politicians were careful to remain near the fount of honour and emolument, declined the post. It was about six months after this refusal that he was chosen to conduct the negotiations with the French Government.

There were many difficulties in the way of Cobden's mission, and its success might have been impossible if the personal direction of the two Governments had been less decidedly favourable to the arrangement proposed. The relations between the French and English people were at this crisis anything but cordial. The French Emperor had destroyed all the popularity which he had won in his campaign against Austria by ending it before he had fully secured the interests of Italy, and by exacting from Italy as the price of his assistance the two provinces of Savoy and Nice. He was credited with aggressive designs on his neighbours: and whether he nursed such designs or not, it is certain that a considerable number of Frenchmen were constantly indulging in provocative language, and even exciting the Emperor to pick a quarrel with England. The feeling of irritation created in this country, exaggerated as it was by a lack of coolness in some of our public speakers and politicians, rose to a high pitch at the beginning of the year 1860, and greatly increased the difficulty of Cobden's undertaking.

Lord John Russell, who, as Foreign Secretary, directed the negotiations, laid it down as the basis of the Treaty that neither country should, so long as the instrument

remained in force, make any fiscal alterations inconsistent with it; though in all other respects he reserved full liberty of action. "The two Governments," he wrote in the instructions given to Cobden, "will be free to extend to all countries the concessions they engage to make to one another. . . . The two Governments are to be at liberty to regulate all conditions of import and export, as to place or otherwise, for particular articles, and to designate the ports at which any branch of trade may be carried on, of course with reference to the due economy of Customs establishments. . . . Again, the abolition or limitation of duty would not preclude either Government from imposing upon goods such charges as are known in this country by the name of rates or dues, and as are intended, not for the purpose of raising a general revenue at the cost of trade, but merely either to sustain or to mitigate the cost imposed upon the public by the necessary establishments at the respective ports. Lastly, it may be requisite to advert to the time at which the meditated changes shall take effect. On the side of England, Her Majesty's Government will propose that with respect to all those articles which are to be set free from duty, and removed altogether from the tariff, those articles shall become free on the day succeeding that on which a resolution in Committee of the House of Commons, affirming the proposed freedom from Customs duty, shall have been duly reported and agreed to by the House itself."

Cobden departed on his honourable mission, armed, as he thought, with ample powers, and he found the French Commissioners ready to enter into the details of the new arrangement. He had not been long in Paris before the irritation above mentioned almost succeeded in arresting the progress of the business in hand. Lord Palmerston attached importance to the rumours of intended French hostility, and even went so far as to give credence in Parliament to a

statement that France was preparing vessels for the invasion of England. These were bad auspices for the discussion and conclusion of a commercial treaty. Cobden's French colleagues were annoyed and perplexed by the excitement which manifested itself across the Channel; and at the same time he found that the English Government was by no means unanimous and hearty in supporting his efforts. He nevertheless persevered with his task, and displayed so much ability, conciliation, and calm judgment throughout, that every difficulty was smoothed away.

How great the difficulties were felt to be at the time may be judged from the letters written by Cobden to his friends in England, and from the statements of those who knew what had been going on behind the scenes. Mr. Slagg of Manchester, writing in the *Fortnightly Review* for March 1877, mentions the grounds for suspecting that the rumours of French invasion were spread about for the single purpose of frightening the people of this country into a huge expenditure on military preparations. "Without one solid pretext, without a single misgiving as to the conduct of the Emperor, which could not have been dispelled by the most ordinary inquiry, the Premier raised the invasion panic, the newspapers wrote invasion articles, and the people blindly followed. In vain did Cobden plead that a large addition to the expenditure should not be made until at least the terms of the treaty were sealed and published, so that the public might know what were the prospects of an extended commerce between the two countries, and then be in a position to judge whether it was wise to take any further precautions for the contingency of a rupture with our new customer. There were perhaps not more than two men in the Cabinet who cared whether the expenditure of the Government was a dozen millions more or less; and just then, unfortunately, the country was nearly as indifferent as the Government. Cobden had promised the Emperor that if he entered on a

path of Free Trade without reserve, it would be accepted by the English people as a proof that he meditated a policy of peace. Yet in the midst of his labours upon the details of the tariff, in which he had every day fresh proofs of the honest intentions of the Emperor, there was a constant increase in the military preparations in England. Lord Palmerston's project for fortifying the British coasts at the cost of ten or twelve millions, and his constant allusions to France as the probable aggressor upon England, were a mockery and an insult to Cobden when engaged in framing a peaceful treaty of commerce; and so keenly did he feel the sting and the humiliation of this position that, had not his heart been too keenly in the work, he would probably have returned home, and directed his efforts to preventing the popular party from being committed to a policy so outrageous. Cobden took enormous pains in gathering information to prove that no such warlike intentions existed in the Emperor's mind; that the naval preparations of France existed only in the brains of Englishmen."

The treaty was not signed until November, and in the meantime it was necessary that the House of Commons should agree to certain votes, modifying the tariff on the principles which it was proposed to establish in the agreement between France and England. Mr. Gladstone introduced his Budget as early as the 10th of February, but before this date the draft of the treaty had been prepared, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer was able to explain its principal features to the House. France had agreed to reduce the import duties on English coal, coke, and pig-iron, which had hitherto been charged at the rate of thirty per cent., to a maximum of twenty-five per cent. England agreed to abolish the duties on all manufactured French goods, to reduce the duty on brandy from 15s. to 8s. 2d., and on wine from 5s. 10d. to 3s. An alcoholic test was adopted

for French wines, and the customs duties on French spirits were to be equalised with the excise duties on home and colonial spirits. The treaty was to last for ten years. At a subsequent stage Mr. Gladstone fixed the wine duties at rates varying from one shilling to two shillings a gallon, on a scale including the wines of all foreign countries, and of various alcoholic strength.

The Parliamentary Opposition did not permit the adoption of the new treaty without a protest. On the motion for going into Committee on the Government proposals, Mr. Disraeli moved as an amendment, "that this House does not think fit to go into Committee on the Customs Act, with a view to the reduction or repeal of the duties referred to in the treaty of commerce between Her Majesty and the Emperor of the French, until it shall have considered and assented to the engagements in the treaty." The House, however, on a division, sanctioned the treaty negotiations by a majority of 293 to 230 ; whilst it approved the main proposals of the Budget by 339 to 223.

The conclusion of the commercial treaty with France approximately coincided with the abolition of the last shilling of the corn importation duty, so that we may regard the legislation of this period as definitely setting its seal upon what had now become the recognised commercial policy of England.

More than one public acknowledgment of the services of Cobden in connection with the treaty, and with the Free Trade movement in general, were made in 1850 and the succeeding years of his life. Mr. Gladstone in particular did not grudge the praise which was due to the earnest and single-minded reformer. When introducing the Budget of the year just named, he remarked that he could not forbear to express the obligation he felt to him for the labour which he had, at no small personal sacrifice, bestowed upon a measure which Mr. Cobden himself, "not the least among

the apostles of Free Trade," considered to be one of the greatest triumphs which Free Trade had ever achieved. "It is a great privilege," he added, "for any man who, having fifteen years ago rendered to his country one important and signal service, now enjoys the singular good fortune of having it in his power—undecorated, bearing no mark of rank or of title from his Sovereign, or from the people—to perform another signal service in the same cause for the benefit of, I hope, a not ungrateful country."

The country was perhaps a trifle more grateful to Cobden than the Government; for though the friends of the chief negotiator of the commercial treaty put forward his claims to a special recognition of his services, in addition to the payment (as Mr. Ashworth styles it) of his "tavern bill of £1500," the Cabinet decided that there was no precedent for rewarding a purely commercial service. He received the offer of a baronetcy, which he declined, as he had previously declined a position in the Government under Lord Palmerston.

The chief and notable virtue of this treaty—its effect in drawing closer together two great nations, formerly kept apart by constant jealousies, but henceforth more and more at one in feeling and aims—was duly recognised at the time, as it has been proved and exemplified in recent years. Thus Lord John Russell, answering Mr. Horsman's criticisms on the conduct of the Government in regard to the cession of Savoy and Nice to France, dwelt on the fact that the annexation question and the commercial question had existed simultaneously, with the result that the treaty had softened the unnecessary animosity displayed in regard to the other matter. "The Powers of Europe, he said, if they wish to maintain peace, and to respect each other's rights, must respect each other's limits, and, above all, restore and not disturb that commercial confidence which is the result of peace, which tends to peace, and which constitutes the happiness of nations.

Mr. Thorold Rogers, in a volume already quoted, discusses the character and issue of the commercial treaty with much force, and with a hearty appreciation of the conduct of Richard Cobden.\* "That there should be any demur," he says, "to the acceptance of Free Trade can be due only to the fact that interests which never ought to have been created, because they do not naturally exist, oppose a beneficent policy. It is possible that certain French manufactures, which are supposed to be imperilled by the adoption of Free Trade, would not only survive the shock, but would thrive under a healthy system of competition, and that the evidence afforded by the results of the Commercial Treaty of 1860 is sufficient to remove or abate many of the alarms which were honestly entertained when the experiment of a modified Free Trade was originally attempted. But even if it were found that some manufactures must be abandoned in order to effect the general good of the country, it cannot but be that the minor and unimportant interests should give way to the great advantage which an agricultural country invariably discovers in the extension of its markets. The changes in the English tariff contained in the Budget of 1860 made the occasion for Mr. Cobden's commercial diplomacy. . . . It is true that the changes which the English Government was bent on making were the basis of negotiations on which certain concessions were demanded from France, and that, strictly speaking, there was no reciprocity whatever in the Treaty. It is also true that the English Government, by means of Cobden's diplomacy, assisted the Government of the French Emperor in imposing a Free Trade policy on a rural population which was generally indifferent to the change, because it was ignorant of the beneficial results which would ensue from it, and on reluctant manufacturers who might have been alarmed for their

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\* *Cobden and Political Opinion*, p. 312.



monopoly and were professedly fearful of their very existence. Hence it has been said that the negotiations of 1860 were carried on rather in a missionary than in a diplomatic spirit, and the principle by which they were guided was grotesque and out of place. It may be admitted at once, that if the success of diplomatic finesse consists in overreaching the Government of one among the intriguing States, and that the whole of these international relations which proceed from embassies are simply the machinery for finding the gain of one nation in the loss of another, the commercial diplomacy of Cobden was absolutely alien from ordinary diplomatic traditions. But it is, I submit, equally clear that the distinction is a condemnation of political diplomacy altogether, and that if the difference holds, those politicians are in the right who argue diplomacy is a standing nuisance and a danger. But it is just in so far as these relations between the governments of different countries are founded upon natural equity, that they are tolerable, and in so far as they bring about feelings of international amity, afford guarantees of peace, and disabuse the public mind of such prejudices or delusions as may lead to grave international differences—in so far, if you please, as they are based upon what is called the missionary spirit—that they are useful, and will be lasting.”

Mr. Thorold Rogers’ remarks on the wide question of international Free Trade are especially valuable at the present time, when the foreseen difficulties in the way of ensuring universal steadfastness in adhering to sound principles of commerce are being fully realised, and when the nations which adhere to these principles are called upon to suffer for their creed. Mr. Rogers wrote the passage above quoted in 1873, and the years which have since elapsed have deepened the significance of his words. England has come to be almost the only great nation which attests by its perseverance the sincerity of its first conversion, and the responsibility

is cast upon it of giving a reason for its faith which may sustain the waverers and lead back the sceptics and unbelievers. No exponent of Free Trade principles has done more serviceable work in this direction than Cobden's friend and interpreter.

All restraints upon the free intercourse of nations, Mr. Rogers proceeds to point out, are virtually acts of war. "They are attempts, more or less openly avowed, to show that it is expedient not only to keep one's neighbour at arm's length, but to cripple his resources or injure his interests. The real purposes which they intend may be disguised under a variety of pretexts, may be the mere defence of selfishness. There is perhaps no country in which a greater number of ingenious and plausible excuses have been alleged for these acts of hostility than have been in the United States, where reasons are brought forward for a Protective policy by persons whose abilities make it all but impossible to believe that the opinion or the argument is a genuine conviction. Thus we are sometimes told that it is expedient that a Government should develop all classes of occupation or industry; sometimes that a nation should be wholly self-supporting; sometimes that a limited period of Protection is necessary in order to secure the existence of an important and legitimate industry; sometimes that the American manufacturer cannot compete against the pauperised labour of the Old World; and a variety of other reasons equally irrelevant and unsound with those which have been quoted. It is fortunate indeed, for the progress of civilisation, that these errors or sophistries carry with them a practical refutation in the decay of trade, in the rise of prices, in the depreciation of labour, in the curtailment of real wages, and the temporary exaggeration of trade profit. Now that a statesman who has the ability to refute these fallacies, and the opportunity to give practical effect to his refutation, should undertake a negotiation with a foreign Government

in order to induce such a change in a fiscal system as will be wholly beneficent, is, I submit, a clear gain to mankind. To make light of the effort, and to nickname it, is, I think, as short-sighted as it is malignant. The intercourse of nations should be one of mutual benefit; and it is a mere relapse into the selfish theory, which, up to fifty years ago, characterised the trade legislation of Europe, to be indifferent to the wisdom or folly of foreign systems, and to acquiesce, as though it were a fixed maxim of deliberate prudence, in the dogma that we may be intelligent for ourselves only, and let the exports take care of themselves. On grounds of public policy, and on grounds of general advantage, it is expedient that we should seek to extend the area over which Free Trade is accepted, and bring other nations into the same mind with ourselves. Negligence in this direction gives a colour to the ridiculous, but oft-repeated statement, that the English nation has indeed gained its advantage in Free Trade, but that this system is suited only to the peculiar genius or destiny of the English people. It is superfluous to say that what is found to be good for ourselves is good for other communities also. It may be proved that the beneficence of the change is incomplete, as far as regards ourselves, until other nations have entered on the same policy."

The real difficulty is not so much the selfishness of the nations which refuse or discontinue to practice Free Trade, as the short-sightedness which prevents them from admitting that Free Trade would serve them best in the long run. They are in haste to increase their revenues by high tariffs, when a just conception of the matter would convince them that a complete system of mutual accommodations, such as those introduced into the treaty between France and England, would stimulate their trade more than any tariff which they can impose, and would increase their national wealth beyond anything which Protection can achieve. The lesson

may be hard, and the practice undoubtedly requires confidence and courage; but we need not despair of the ultimate accord of nations in a system so manifestly based upon reason and common sense.

The session of 1860 is a very notable one in the history of the Free Trade movement, for many of its chief debates and incidents turned upon the zealous application of the newly adopted principles from the Treasury bench. The last formal contest in behalf of Protection was waged by the opponents of Mr. Gladstone's proposal to abolish the paper duty, which, after being carried by a small majority in the Commons, was rejected by a vote in the House of Lords. Strenuous protests were at once raised against this interference of the hereditary House with the action of the popular representatives in regard to a repeal of taxation. Mr. Gladstone asked and obtained another qualified vote on the same issue before the adjournment, and in the following session he finally abolished the impost—with such remarkable results as must be familiar to every Englishman of the present generation. Free Trade has given us a free breakfast table, and it has done as much as anything else to give us a cheap, efficient, and free Press.





## CHAPTER XXVI.

### THE WORK AND CHARACTER OF COBDEN.

**R**ICHARD COBDEN died on the 2nd of April 1865, being then in his sixty-first year. His health, never very robust, had been failing for some time. He felt the effect of the long and wearing struggle, the agitation and the hard work, through which he had passed, and to which he had devoted almost the third of a century and the half of his life. He had had abundant cause for triumph, and he had had the opportunities of rest and travel; but he had also suffered many anxieties, both public and private. There can be no doubt that his early poverty, the dependence which had been forced upon him by the sacrifice of his business prospects, and even the taunts which had been levelled against him in consequence of this independence, gravely affected his peace of mind and his physical condition. In particular, the loss which he sustained by his unfortunate investments in American railways caused extreme depression of spirit, which was conspicuous at the time, and from which he can scarcely be said to have recovered.

In the House of Commons eloquent testimony was borne by the leaders on both sides to the great services and

virtues of the deceased statesman. The Premier, Lord Palmerston (who was himself to die about six months later, and who made very few appearances in the House after this date), referred in generous terms to the death of a man with whom his personal relations had never been very cordial, and who had consistently refused his offers of honours and emoluments. He mentioned in words of warm praise the two great achievements of Cobden's life, the agitation for Free Trade and the negotiation of the French Treaty, bearing his testimony to the fact that this treaty had already greatly stimulated the commercial intercourse between the two countries. "When this last achievement was accomplished," Lord Palmerston said, "it was my lot to offer Mr. Cobden those honours which the Crown could bestow for such important services, and which were not derogatory to him to accept; but that same disinterested spirit which regulated all his private and public conduct led him to decline them."

Mr. Disraeli, who then led the Opposition, observed that there were some men who, even when they were gone, would always remain members of the House, "independent of dissolutions, or of the caprices of constituents, or of the lapse of time." "I think," he said, "that Mr. Cobden is one of those men, and I believe that when the verdict of posterity shall be recorded upon his life and conduct, it will be said of him that he was, without doubt, the greatest politician that the upper middle class of this country has yet produced, and that he was not only an ornament to the House of Commons but an honour to England." It is certainly true that the influence of Cobden has continued, ever since his death, to be a strong and even a growing power in Parliament, where he has always had many disciples, and where his expressed opinions have been listened to with respect.

Mr. Bright spoke on the same occasion with much emotion, natural in one who had lost a friend and close

associate during many years. After expressing his gratification at the sympathy which had been displayed towards the deceased, and confessing that he was unable to address the House at any length, he said : " At some calmer moment, when I may have the opportunity of addressing my countrymen, I will endeavour to show the lesson which I think may be learned from the life and character of my friend. I can only say that, after many years of most intimate and most brotherly friendship with him, I little knew how much I loved him until I found that I had lost him." \*

Many public references were made to the death of "the international man," as one of his French friends styled him. Cobden's name had become known far and wide in Europe and America, and the advocates of Free Trade all over the world paid generous tributes to his memory. His funeral was of a private character. He was buried in the churchyard at Lavington, but some fifty members of Parliament, and a large number of his old fellow-workers from Manchester and elsewhere, made a point of following his body to the grave. It was felt that one of the strongest, most prominent and promising politicians of the day had passed out of the arena of public life, and that his country had lost one of its greatest ornaments.

Mr. Mongredien, in his *History of the Free Trade Movement in England*, estimates the character and abilities of Richard Cobden in the following terms :—" Cobden earned imperishable renown, and made his name an object of affectionate reverence, not only among Englishmen, but all the world over, by his masterly advocacy of the principles of 'Free trade, peace, and goodwill among nations.' Great as were his abilities, he had a distrust of them approaching to humility ; but such was his intense earnestness that, in the presence of a duty to be performed, his nervous timidity

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\* Irving, April 2, 1865.

vanished. One of the most gentle and sympathetic of men, it was very distasteful to him to use harsh or bitter words ; and yet, when the necessity arose, he forced his nature, and his denunciations of wrong or injustice were vehement and withering.

“Of eloquence, in the rhetorical sense, he had none ; but he had complete mastery over the facts and arguments connected with his subject. His language was at once lucid and concise—his logic quick at detecting, and acute at demolishing, a sophism—he abounded in apposite illustrations and anecdotes—he went straight to the hearts of his hearers by home-thrusts and direct appeals to their sense and feeling—he was often familiar and colloquial, but never tedious, trite, or feeble, for he always grappled with his topic at close quarters, so that every word told and every sentence had a point. As to oratorical adornments or graces of elocution, he never aimed at them, but when thoroughly roused, either by irritating opposition or by the congenial sympathy of his audience, there would occasionally flash out of his speeches some sudden, bright inspiration, couched in a few glowing words, which would excite the more enthusiasm from its rareness and brevity. His delivery was, like his language, plain and homely, but it was as genial and impressive. It was that of a thoroughly sincere man, who intensely felt what he expressed, and whose words were the exact reflex of his inward thoughts. Often was he branded as an enthusiast and a visionary, but his bitterest opponent never taxed him with duplicity.

“In his personal intercourse he was gentle, sympathetic, and singularly unassuming. He unconsciously exercised over all who came into contact with him, whether relations, friends, or strangers, that undefinable magnetic influence which few possess, and which none, if they have it not, can acquire—an influence which irresistibly attracts attention and regard, sometimes deference and sympathy. He received



everybody, from the highest to the lowest, with the same frank and simple courtesy, and his condolence and assistance were extended to every sufferer by wrong, whether national, sectional, or personal. To quote an able representative of the working classes :—‘ A cause might be despised, obscure, or poor, he not only helped it all the same—he helped it all the more. . . . In the day of triumph he shrank modestly on one side and stood in the common ranks ; but in the dark or stormy days of unfriended truth he was always to the front.’

“ He was thoroughly English in tastes, habits, and predilections ; but, according to his creed, the interests of England were not only consistent, but identical with those of mankind at large. He repudiated and abominated the doctrine that the prosperity of one country is incompatible with the prosperity of the rest. He was deeply convinced, and always spoke and acted on the conviction, that the precise contrary is the truth, and that each nation is most prosperous when all the rest are prosperous. As St. Louis Mallet expresses it in his excellent introduction to *Cobden’s Political Works* : ‘ Cobden believed that the real interests of the individual, of the nation, and of all nations, are identical.’ It is to this enlarged and cosmopolitan view of the relations between man and man, irrespective of the artificial boundaries mapped out between nation and nation, and also to the personal intercourse he held with the leading men of all countries during his frequent travels on the Continent, that Cobden owed the universality of his fame.

“ When, in the plenitude of his powers and at the zenith of his career, he was taken from our midst, a pang of regret throbbed throughout the whole of the civilised world. His loss was hardly more deplored, or his memory more eulogised, at home than it was abroad. Well did Drouyn de Lhuys, the French Foreign Minister, in his official despatch on the occasion, designate him ‘ the international man.’ His

influence was purely personal, for he held no office ; but it was all the more weighty and widespread. He was indefatigable in using it, and he never used it except in a cause which he deemed just and holy. Plutarch's pen had drawn no nobler character."

Cobden's friend and partial biographer, Mr. Ashworth, whose very interesting volume has been frequently quoted in these pages, supplies some general details of a personal nature which will assist us in forming a definite conception of the man who occupies so unique a place in the annals of the nineteenth century.

Writing of the revision of the Commercial Treaty with France—which, agreed to in 1860 for ten years, was renewed for a similar term in 1870—Mr. Ashworth says :—"Without in any way reflecting upon the men who are engaged in the work on the English side, it may fairly be affirmed that success in the negotiation, in the Free Trade sense, would be much more certain if we had now a Cobden to undertake the task. His clear intellect, his great experience, his powers of argument, and his suavity of manner would be invaluable. His pamphlet on Russia, Turkey, and England, although a third of a century old, reads as if it had been written by an observer of present events ; and after the lapse of more than a generation the nation at large is only now adopting his views. Mr. Cobden was a most simple-minded man, endued with a profound faith that what is right in principle cannot be wrong in practice. He was a thorough believer in the value of personal freedom ; in freedom of thought and expression, and its consequent freedom of action. He lent valuable assistance to the movement which repealed the advertisement duty, the newspaper stamp duty, and the excise on the manufacture of paper ; together with the law which obliged the proprietors of newspapers to find securities against the publication of libels, and which also obliged them to register every printing-press. The practical outcome of all these

measures has been to reduce the *Times* newspaper from sixpence to threepence, the *Daily News* and *Standard* from fourpence-halfpenny to one penny each per copy ; to double the size and vastly improve the quality of our provincial papers, reducing them at the same time from fourpence-halfpenny to one penny each ; to inaugurate a considerable number of halfpenny papers, and to so increase newspapers generally that there is now scarcely a populous village in the land without its local organ. Workmen in London, instead of going to the public-house in the evening to hear the paper read, can now have the *Daily News* or *Standard* delivered at their houses before breakfast in the morning, and thus become promptly acquainted with, and able to take an intelligent part in discussing, the various affairs of the nation, and even the most important events of the world at large.

“Mr. Cobden’s political career commenced, as we have seen, when the nation was suffering from a series of bad harvests, and when nearly every foreign import was heavily taxed ; so that, while home trade was impossible because of scarcity, foreign trade was made equally impossible by legal enactments. People in England died for want of work and food, whilst corn rotted in Russia, in Turkey, and in America for want of purchasers, and the growers thereof were only half-clothed for want of the manufactures which English workmen were begging their employers to be allowed to produce. All this Mr. Cobden saw, and he thought that the facts which were so clear to him had only to be laid before the public in order to secure entire freedom of trade, and by its means also to establish, what in his mind was at least equally important—international peace.

“I can bear witness to the truth of the statement made by him at the final meeting of the League, that he always went before the public with reluctance. I know him to have been a devoted husband and a most affectionate father,

and hence I infer that when he determined to go into the agitation for the repeal of the Corn and Provision Laws, he must have sadly miscalculated the amount of labour necessary for the purpose. He never could have reckoned on the frequent and prolonged absences from home which became necessary during the process of the agitation, for he intended to give liberally to the sustentation fund, and to be only an honorary worker for the cause; and he could never have foreseen the commercial failure which arose from his entire devotion to the interests of the public. Mr. Cobden very soon became not only the leader, but the very personification of the League; he was necessary to its existence; and the Council, by endeavouring to compensate him for his trading losses, and thus to retain his further services, acted in their own interests, as well as for the best interests of the country. At a later period Mr. Bright took a full share of the work, and contributed freely of his pecuniary wealth, in addition to his splendid oratorical and argumentative talents. But whilst other men gave of their superfluities to advance the cause of freedom and prosperity, Mr. Cobden, the leader of the League, and Mr. George Wilson, the Chairman of the Council, each gave his whole living. Measured by the success attained by other men in Mr. Cobden's trade, the gifts made him—like the £10,000 voted to Mr. Wilson, and the library presented to Mr. Bright—were the merest acknowledgments of splendid services, which still left the subscribers and the nation at large very much their debtors."

The testimony of Mr. Thorold Rogers to the breadth and impartiality of Cobden's views is of a valuable character. Mr. Rogers speaks first of the features of the so-called Manchester School, whereof Cobden was generally credited with being the founder:—\*

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\* *Cobden and Political Opinion*, Preface, ix, xv.

"The leading tenets of this school were very successfully travestied during his life. It was described as being a peace-at-any-price party, as the party of sordid manufacturers, who were intent on nothing but their own gains, and who were ready to sacrifice labour to capital, as un-English, and eager to Americanise our institutions, as enemies of the Great British Empire, as contemptuous towards culture, as Philistine in its enjoyments, as delighting to set class against class, as animated with the bitterest feelings against landlords and farmers. My readers will find the several charges referred to in the subsequent pages, and I hope refuted. The school which Cobden—I will not say founded, for all who have assisted the solid progress of good government and national prosperity have belonged to it, but strengthened, affirmed that freedom was the natural condition of the individual, and that restraint must always be justified in order to be defended. In the presence of an outrageous and ruinous wrong, the old Corn Laws, it assailed the principle of protection to agriculture with irresistible force. But it was the accident of a fact which caused the assault to be made on this position. It attacked every kind of protection, on the ground that the assistance given to one interest was an injury, a restraint, an indefensible control on other interests, which were depressed, impoverished, and dwarfed in consequence. The promoters of this doctrine know very well that the orderliness and control which the law imposes are the guarantees of personal liberty; but they understood by the beneficent operation of law that government or law which protects all equally, not that which gives a licence or advantage to a few at the expense of the rest of society. Every man is benefited by the police of justice; a section only is benefited by privilege. Commercial freedom—*i.e.* the right of each individual to employ his labour innocently to his best advantage, and to spend the produce of his labour in the best market which his discretion and opportunities give him—is only one form of the great struggle for social freedom. If the Legislature of this country, like a grand jury, executed a high trust on the principle that it would award to the best of its judgment fair and equal law, just and impartial taxation to all, it would, as far as the result is concerned, be unimportant whether it were elected by millions or by hundreds. It is sufficiently manifest that it does not do so; and though the British Legislature is perhaps as fair as any which can be found, it is perfectly notorious that it has throughout the greater part of its history assisted or recognised those interests only which have been represented in it. Hence the legitimate demand for an extended franchise, on the ground that the existing mechanism of government is not equitable. . . . It may be confidently stated that, considered as matters of abstract

right or expediency, the justice and soundness of Cobden's views have seldom been questioned by politicians of respectable character and average abilities. Reasons were alleged against concession to his views during the course of his public career, and reasons are now alleged against the acceptance of some of those reforms which he recommended but did not live to see in practice. But it may be affirmed, beyond controversy, that no man has ever leavened the public opinion of England more thoroughly and more extensively than he did, that no man has familiarised his country more fully with principles which were once considered paradoxes. It is allowed that on many subjects the views which were once bitterly assailed or mercilessly ridiculed as they were first promulgated by him, are now adopted and avowed without hesitation or gainsaying. Cobden acted with the Liberal party. But he was not a partisan. From the beginning of his career to its close he declared himself willing to accept reforms from all hands. It is easy to see why he acted with the Liberal party, for the nation has obtained every improvement in law and finance, every concession to justice and equity, from those administrations which have been brought into power by the Liberal party. It is true that in many cases these reforms have been granted slowly, grudgingly, and imperfectly. But there will not be, and cannot be, any reaction from a genuine Liberalism."

Cobden's memory has been cherished, and his opinions have been upheld, mainly by Liberal politicians; but it is true that the most enlightened Conservatives have concurred with their political opponents in accepting and defending the principles of Free Trade, which are admitted by the nation at large to have passed out of the domain of controversial questions, and to have ranged themselves amongst institutions on which the prosperity of the country is based.

The full development of these principles has been studiously and efficiently watched over by the friends and disciples of their first practical exponent, and especially by the members of the Cobden Club. This association was formed in the year after Cobden's death. Its first meeting was presided over by Mr. Gladstone—by this time one of the strongest and most ardent advocates of the views which he had adopted twenty years before. Since this date it has

met year after year ; whilst the Committee have procured and published a vast quantity of information, statistics, and arguments, whereby the doctrines of the "apostle of Free Trade" have been attested and confirmed.

The educational work of Cobden's successors has been further advanced by the foundation of a chair of Political Economy at Owen's College, Manchester, and by the establishment of a Cobden Essay Prize at the University of Oxford.





## CHAPTER XXVII.

### SURVIVING FALLACIES.

THESE are not wanting in our own days a number of persons occupying a more or less public position, and having consequently the power of attracting notice to their opinions, who contend for the reimposition of many of the abandoned duties of former times, and who revive most of the fallacies which have been exposed and rejected. Some of these persons would manifestly bring us back to the system of Protection pure and simple; but the majority of them prefer to limit their demands to something which they describe as Reciprocity, and which they eagerly assure us is by no means the same thing as Protection. It is to be feared that the number of these unsound teachers, both of the more courageous and of those who attempt to draw an impossible distinction, is increasing; and amongst the unreflective sections of the public, who have never studied the subject for themselves, or read the history of the question as it was argued out forty years ago, their adherents are unhappily numerous.

It may be well to review the principal contentions of the advocates of Reciprocity, as adduced from time to time in the newspapers, in books and pamphlets, and even within the walls of Parliament.



Many of the fallacies thus advanced have been dealt with in the foregoing pages, for they are galvanised to life again in the same form which they assumed during the first decades of the century. Of such a kind are the contentions that the free admission of foreign productions, and the absence of encouragement for home production, make us dependent for food and commodities upon other nations, thus greatly increasing our danger in time of war; that Free Trade at the best profits consumers rather than producers, whilst producers are a majority in the community, and ought to be considered in proportion to their greater value to the nation, as well as their greater number; that manufacturers and agriculturists are the principal wealth-producing classes, and that everything which benefits them must benefit the nation as a whole. There is, of course, partial truth in all these contentions; but the fallacy consists in thinking that it is sound and right to argue from the views and advantages of sections of the community, and to base thereon general laws for the nation at large; or in taking two or three plausible reasons and concluding that they cover the whole ground of controversy, though there are such strong and irrefutable arguments to show that the balance of profit from Free Trade is overwhelmingly greater than the balance of profit from Protection.

There are, it is true, some points which were urged by the Protectionists against the principles of Free Trade, and which have been confirmed (as many Free Traders anticipated) by subsequent experience. Free Trade, it used to be said, may be an excellent thing in the abstract, provided it is universally adopted; but if the majority of the great commercial nations decline to practise it, the few who do so will be injured. They will be selling in the cheapest market and buying in the dearest, which is the very opposite of the result at which we ought to aim. This partial isolation of ourselves as Free Traders is precisely what has happened,

and therefore it is stoutly maintained that by declining to have recourse to reciprocal duties we deprive ourselves of the means of compelling or inducing other nations to accept a more enlightened system. But in answer to this it is to be observed that the reciprocal duties recommended to us are not distinguishable from the old Protection; that what applies to one commodity would apply equally well to all; that if we returned to the old principle we should not be able to guard against the worst of the old evils; that we are much less likely to convert our neighbours to wise and advantageous views by going back to the Protective system than by clinging steadfastly to Free Trade. We were not deterred from accepting the new doctrines by the fact that we had to accept them alone, and we are therefore not disposed to abandon them in a moment of discouragement, which we believe to be exceptional and temporary, and which, as we trust, will be succeeded by a reaction in favour of our own views. As for the treaty-making power, which is also alleged to be weakened by our inability to impose fresh duties on our own or other people's commodities, we certainly have the means of offering a *quid pro quo*, as illustrated by the French Treaty, concluded by us after the full adoption of Free Trade. We could hold out inducements to each particular nation in a similar manner; and this is a better foundation for an international agreement than the reciprocity which springs from mutual power of inflicting injury.

But it is contended that Free Trade has not even those facts in its favour which are most strenuously relied upon by its champions in the present day—such as the enormous increase of our national wealth, and in our imports and exports, since the fifth decade of the century. Our imports, it is said, “so largely exceed our exports that we are in danger of national bankruptcy.” And it is maintained that “the increase in the wealth of Great Britain has not been

due to the adoption of Free Trade, but was caused by the invention of telegraphs, improvement in machinery, extension of railways, etc."\* To the argument as to imports and exports it may be assumed that the increase of the former represents a greater purchasing power on the part of the nation; whilst if we were to check the flow of imports by a tariff of duties, we should be also checking the exports in a proportional degree. With regard to the general extension of trade since 1842, no doubt there have been different causes at work in bringing the improvement to pass. It is a matter of course that the railways and telegraphs, the inventions of a hundred kinds dating from the middle of the present century, have greatly promoted the prosperity of the nation; but they have done so in conjunction with Free Trade, not in lieu of or in spite of it. Moreover, these very inventions have in many cases been made, or have flourished, in consequence of the vast expansion of commerce; they have been an effect, as well as a cause, of industrial progress. It might be impossible to say whence the chief benefit has arisen, or to define the limits of influence in either case. But as it is admitted on all hands that Free Trade is in itself, and abstractly, an advantageous system, and as we can directly trace to it much and many species of profit, we are entitled to conclude that it is prominent amongst the causes of our recent national development.

It is sometimes said that, though our intentions in establishing and promoting Free Trade were excellent, we have tried it long enough to ascertain that other nations will not follow our example, and we ought not to persist in a policy which places our own manufacturers and producers at a disadvantage with those of other countries. It is quite true that we have been disappointed by the refusal and repudia-

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\* See Mr. Sydney Buxton's *Handbook on Political Questions*, where the arguments on either side are very concisely set forth.

tion of sound commercial views on the part of Governments from whom we had expected most hearty co-operation ; and we cannot be surprised that this repudiation is seized upon as an argument which ought to affect our own attitude in the matter.

In a letter recently published, Mr. Bright took note of this contention, and answered one or two of the fallacies which have been put forth by the advocates of Reciprocity. Englishmen, said Mr. Bright, must regret that France, the United States of America, and other countries, continue to maintain their high tariffs. "It is, as we believe, a misfortune to them and injurious to us ; but we can only legislate for our own country, and not for them. If you think that, not being able to sell freely, we shall mend ourselves by giving up the power to buy freely, I must leave you to that opinion, only expressing my wonder at it. . . . The French Senate is in favour of more Protection ; the Chamber of Deputies is disposed to Free Trade and to a more liberal policy. The Free Trade party in France is more powerful than in past times, and it is not certain that the proposed treaty will be less favourable to trade between the two countries." As to America, Mr. Bright added : "How will you compel its Government to reduce their tariff? By placing duties on American exports to England? If so, on what exports? On cotton for the mills of Lancashire, or on corn for the poor of all our people? The American Protective tariff makes it difficult or impossible for the Americans to become great exporters of manufactures. If you fight them at the Custom House you can only assail them by duties on cotton and on corn, and this surely will not benefit Lancashire or the West Riding. When the debt of the United States is much reduced, when their revenue is in excess of their wants, then their tariff will be reformed and their import duties will be reduced."

As the example of the United States is most frequently

adduced for the purpose of confounding Free Traders in this country, it is worth while to quote from a remarkable letter recently addressed by Mr. Thomas Spearman of New York to Mr. T. B. Potter, Cobden's successor in the representation of Rochdale, and one of the principal officers of the Cobden Club from its institution. Mr. Spearman has been proof against the reaction of his fellow-countrymen, but he bears witness to the great strength of the Protectionist cry in America, and to the difficulty which attends the Free Trade movement in the various States. Pennsylvania, he says, has always been a great stronghold of Protection. "Nearly all her politicians, of both parties, agree upon this issue, and have for sixty years or more. New Jersey is of the same mind, because she is also an iron manufacturing State, lying by the side of Pennsylvania. But without the vote of Pennsylvania it is impossible to elect a Republican President, as the solid South, with Pennsylvania and New Jersey, would have votes enough to control the result. A large majority of Republicans are naturally Protectionists from mere habit and education. A large majority of the Democrats are naturally Free Traders. Well, then, why should not independent Free Traders vote for the Democrats, and so bring about Free Trade? Alas! the Democrats are more unsound on all currency questions than the Republicans are on the tariff; and what is the use of a reduced tariff if we are to have a ruined currency? And when the Democrats get a little power they do nothing towards amending the tariff, but put all their energy into depreciating the currency. . . . Parties in this country are not divided upon clear principles belonging to the present day, but each lives on old traditions. Each has some good doctrines, but each has some very bad ones. The Democratic party, unfortunately, is enthusiastic for all its bad features, but very lazy for carrying out its good ones. Again, the Irish voters, about 1,000,000 in number, are mostly Democrats. Conse-

quently, the English, Scotch, and Welsh voters, numbering about 300,000, instinctively join the Republicans. But the Irish hatred of England, which is more intense here than even in Mr. Parnell's country, makes the Irish look kindly on Protection, because they are told that England suffers from it. Mr. Parnell lately made a furious Protectionist speech on this ground. Thus the Democratic support of Free Trade is made uncertain; and the Democrats of Pennsylvania and New Jersey are unequivocally for Protection. On the other hand, the English and Scotch voters cannot bear to vote for Irish candidates, as they must, if they work with the Democratic party. . . . If we could only convince the Irish that England made a profit out of our present tariff, they would be eager for its repeal. As our system shuts us out of all the markets of the world for our manufactures, and has destroyed our shipping, I do not believe that it can have been very injurious to England, which has taken possession of both. Have you not observed that England never advanced so rapidly in wealth and commerce as since we shut ourselves in by Protection?

"The general ignorance in this country upon the tariff is deplorable; yet I have sometimes thought that the average Englishman was not much wiser. Has not the present generation grown without much education on the subject, and simply accepted Free Trade as a matter of course, without understanding its real foundations? I am led to think so by the ignorance of many Englishmen with whom I have talked, by the temporary strength of the Reciprocity movement, by the speeches of such men as the Hamiltons and Sandons at Liverpool, and by the very poor arguments which are used by English papers in trying to convert Americans. I cannot help thinking that Mill's *Political Economy* is weak on this subject; and one of his admissions is a fatal one for Americans, if well founded, as I am sure it is not. Indeed, I have not been able to find a clear state-

ment of the fundamental doctrines of Free Trade in any recent English books. Are you not taking too much for granted in England, and resting on your laurels? That is just how we lost the cause in this country. Twenty-five years ago Protection was abandoned by all parties here; and its advocates were in utter despair. But the victory was supposed to have been won years before; and the discussion of the question was given up. One year of depression revived the Protectionist feeling of Pennsylvania; a bargain was made, by which her vote was secured for the destruction of slavery in consideration of a Protective tariff; and it turned out that the people had forgotten all that they once knew on the subject. We shall convert them again; but it will take time."

There is probably some truth in Mr. Spearman's suggestion that Englishmen have rested too much upon their laurels, and have taken too much for granted. It is a mistake to make light of all the pleas that are put forward on behalf of Reciprocity; and as there are many of them which can only be rebutted by a direct appeal to first principles, and by patiently arguing the case out again from the beginning, it is not sufficient simply to refer a sceptic or an opponent to the results of former controversies, without being prepared to go over the whole ground, like an original member of the Anti-Corn Law League. A few writers of the present day have done this, or attempted to do it. No one has written more clearly and concisely on this subject than Sir Louis Mallet, who is amongst our highest living authorities on the principles and practical operations of Free Trade.

Speaking of Reciprocity, in a short tract issued by the Cobden Club, Sir Louis Mallet has pointed out that the essence of all trade is and must be Reciprocity. "Every transaction of commerce by which one man voluntarily sells his produce or property to another is an act of reciprocity,

and is complete in itself. The imposition of a duty by one country on the produce or manufactures of another only affects the transaction by rendering it less profitable both to the seller and to the buyer; the variations of supply and demand will cause the incidence of the tax to fall upon the seller and the buyer, the producer and the consumer, in varying degree; but, in the long run, it will be equally shared between them.

“This may be put in a way which leaves no door open for dispute or discussion. It must be admitted that, in principle, the effect will be precisely the same whatever the amount of the tax or the extent of the restriction—whether a duty of ten, fifty, or a hundred per cent. be imposed, there must be a point at which a duty becomes a prohibition. What is true in this extreme is equally true at every point and at every stage of the protective process. To whatever degree a country protects its own productions, it protects in precisely the same degree the productions of the countries with which it trades; for to whatever extent it closes its ports on foreign commodities, it prevents foreign countries from importing its own. If this be true, and it cannot be otherwise, it follows that the more nearly the tariffs of foreign countries approach to the limits of prohibition, the more will the British producer be protected in his own market. Those, therefore, who desire this kind of reciprocity—viz. the reciprocity of monopoly—must rejoice at every new restriction placed upon British trade abroad, as necessarily involving increased protection to British trade at home.”

Sir Louis Mallet, in the tract just quoted, brings to a narrow and accurate test the proposals of those who would have us retaliate upon the countries which refuse to adopt Free Trade, and thus enter upon a war of tariffs. “Reciprocity in their sense means,” Sir Louis Mallet assumes, “that we should treat other countries as they treat us, whatever the effect upon ourselves—i.e., that we should



apply to each foreign country a tariff of duties which would correspond, as nearly as might be, with that which it enforces against us. Let us see where this would lead us. Our imports may be divided broadly into three classes: 1. Raw products or raw materials. 2. Manufactured and half-manufactured goods. 3. Articles of consumption, as food, drink, or tobacco, subdivided into (so-called)—*a*. Necessaries. *b*. Luxuries.

“The value of our imports in 1877, in each of these classes were :—

|                                                   |                |             |
|---------------------------------------------------|----------------|-------------|
| 1. Raw products or raw materials . . .            | £130,410,250   |             |
| 2. Manufactured and half-manufactured goods . . . | 49,089,241     |             |
| 3. Articles of Consumption . . .                  |                |             |
| <i>a</i> . Necessaries . . .                      | £140,954,110 } | 177,325,151 |
| <i>b</i> . Luxuries . . .                         | £36,371,041 }  |             |
| Articles not classified . . .                     |                | 37,954,336  |

“I presume that it can only be in respect of the second of these three classes that any new scheme of taxation could be proposed; for it is improbable that our manufacturing industries would desire to curtail their supply of raw material, or that the people of England will ever again submit to Corn Laws or Sugar Duties, and return to their small loaf and dear grocery, while our so-called luxuries, such as spirits, tobacco, wine, beer, tea, and coffee are already so heavily taxed that the less we say about them the better. It is therefore only with about an eighth part of our import trade that we are, at the most, free to deal, and from this no inconsiderable deduction must, I presume, be made, for I can hardly believe that our manufacturing interest, as a whole, would desire duty on half-manufactured goods intended for further processes which employ British capital and labour. If, then, for the purpose of a policy of reciprocal restriction, it were proposed to reimpose duties on this small class of imports, how could that purpose be attained?”

From the United States—the greatest offender against us

in the matter of protective and prohibitive duties—we import, as Sir Louis Mallet shows, less than two millions sterling in value of manufactured goods, half of which consists of tanned and curried hides. There is not much room for Reciprocity here. From Russia and the Peninsula, which countries also levy high duties on our goods, we import still less in the way of manufactures, and consequently we could do still less with them by retaliation. And as it is we tax their luxuries, especially the Spanish and Portuguese wines, at such a rate as to secure a revenue far greater than that which they raise from our exports to them. France sends us yearly a supply of manufactured goods, not being food or luxuries, amounting in value to sixteen millions sterling. Much of this trade is due to the Cobden treaty, and it would probably fall off again if we returned to the old vicious system. We have received a very considerable benefit from the treaty in various ways, and it would be unwise as well as rapacious if we were to select for our victim the country which has treated us, at all events for twenty years, incomparably better than any other nation of the first rank.

The advocates of Reciprocity are generally anxious to show that their aims and desires do not point to the restoration of the old state of things, and certainly not to the protection of class interests, or to the prohibition of food imports. But it is as easy for others as for themselves, perhaps more easy, to decide whither their arguments really tend, and what would be the logical issue of the measures which they propose. Their speeches and publications are as a rule adorned with or based upon fallacies from the armoury of the refuted and defeated Protectionists. A nation does not twice fight such a campaign as that in which Cobden and his friends distinguished themselves thirty or forty years ago. In order that we may not be called upon to do so, even to the extent of repelling a

serious attack, it is certainly desirable that we should persevere, as occasion offers, in popularising and making familiar the main principles of the Free Trade doctrine. Simple as these doctrines are, when clearly understood, they require to be taught and kept in remembrance for successive generations, at any rate until the last relics of the system of indirect taxation are swept away and forgotten.

It is not likely that an English Government will ever attempt to obtain revenue by imposing new burdens on industry and commerce. The danger of reaction will spring chiefly from the ignorance of the very classes which would most grievously suffer from the limitation of Free Trade. But although it does not appear probable to any one who has studied the arguments in favour of a Free Trade policy, and who has read the history of the original controversy, that the protective tariffs should ever again be revived in England, we must clearly expect that a determined effort will be made to drag us into a course of retaliation against the countries which lay heavy import duties upon our exports. The struggle began some years ago ; it is maintained with great vigour, and has been waged both in Parliament and on the hustings. The courage of the champions of Reciprocity—who are naturally found in greatest number amongst the Conservative politicians—was raised rather than depressed by the death of Lord Beaconsfield. The late Premier, indeed, though his conversion came some time after that of Sir Robert Peel and his followers, was at last sincerely convinced of the truth of the doctrines which he had formerly opposed ; and he never swerved from them. More than once in the last few years of his life he had occasion to reply to one or other of his supporters who had been inoculated with the idea of Reciprocity, and who sought to obtain encouragement from the chief of their party. It is interesting to bear in mind the last utterances of the old Conservative leader on a subject which will, in all

probability, continue to be eagerly discussed for some time to come.

In March 1879, the Marquis of Huntly called attention in the House of Lords to the depressed state of agriculture in Great Britain; and in the course of the debate which followed Lord Beaconsfield said:—

“It has been assumed that there is not only on the part of trade and commerce a depression equal to that which the agricultural interest are labouring under, but a depression which, in the opinion of those who had addressed us, would be identical and similar in its effects and causes to those which have produced the agricultural distress. So far as I can form an opinion from the documents which I have seen and the observations I have made, it is exactly the reverse. That there is an immense depression in trade and commerce no one can deny; but instead of the interests of trade and commerce resembling at this moment that of agriculture, it is quite the reverse. Agriculture at this moment is producing much less than it did before: its production is less. Nearly a million of acres have gone out of cereal cultivation, and it is suffering from foreign competition, which even in its own home markets tries to encounter, and successfully encounter, it; but that is not the condition of our foreign trade. The volume of our foreign trade is not at all diminished. It is perfectly untrue, as far as I can form an opinion, that we have lost markets, or that any branch of foreign industry is successfully competing with us; but there may be occasionally, in the multifarious transactions of English commerce, some particular article which may find itself for a moment shut out from the market, or by a combination of circumstances find a successful and unexpected competition. That is the necessary consequence of the multifarious transactions of British commerce, but the great fact still remains that at this period, and during this continuous period of years of depression, the volume of produc-

tion has been exactly the same. There may have been less profit. Of course there has been, for if there were profit there would not be depression; but the volume of industry is the same—the same quantity of goods has been manufactured, and there are no markets from which we have been successfully shut out, and there are no competitors whom we cannot successfully encounter. Here is a return which exactly proves that case—here are the exports of British and Irish products. The exports of 1873 were £250,000,000. I give only the figures in round numbers. The exports in 1874 were £199,000,000, showing an apparent reduction of £56,000,000. But if you come to the values—if you value the products of 1877, which only produced £199,000, at the same rate as the products of 1873, which were valued at £255,000,000, you will find the difference between them is only less than a million. It is quite clear that although the depression of trade and commerce is so undeniable, this depression does not arise, as it does in the case of agricultural depression, from a less power of production, and from severe and successful competition, but on the contrary we are, and have all these years of depression been, producing an equal quantity of goods—the same volume of English manufactures has entered into all the markets of the world, only we have had lower and still lower prices. I think that a very important circumstance, and one which demands our deepest attention. I doubt not myself that the depression in our home trade is affected very much, as I admitted at first, by bad harvests. Our bad harvests, totally irrespective of the principles on which our industrial system was established, whether it be protective or whether one of free imports, must materially, under all circumstances, affect the trade of the country.”

About a month later Lord Bateman stated his objections to the policy of “Free Trade without Reciprocity,” and maintained that its adoption by England had had a most

injurious effect on our home and colonial industries and on the revenue and taxation of the country. Lord Beaconsfield lightly but firmly controverted these views, at the same time objecting to be confronted by "musty phrases" employed by himself in former years. "The fact is," he said, "whatever may be its merits, Reciprocity is dead. You cannot, if you wish, build up a reciprocal system of commercial treaties. You have lost the power; you have given up all the means by which you could bring about such a result and accomplish the end my noble friend desires. . . . There are no means and no men, from whatever side the Government of this country may be drawn, or whatever men may form it, who could now come forward with a large system of commercial exchange founded on Reciprocity. The opportunity is lost; the means are extinguished; and if that is the only means by which we can be relieved from the great distress which now prevails, the view is hopeless. I would be very sorry to say, whatever may be the condition of the country—and I have not on any occasion attempted to conceal my opinions of it—I would be sorry to think that condition was hopeless. I have had the opportunity, and it has been my duty, during the last six months, to investigate the real condition of some of the principal industries of this country, and I cannot trace to the great commercial changes (the repeal of the Corn Laws) any of the depression and evil which are complained of, with the exception of the land."

In the course of the same session of Parliament the Duke of Rutland raised the subject once more; and Lord Beaconsfield, referring to his previous statement that the volume of exports had not diminished although the value had, said he made the statement "on the highest official authority, and upon facts and documents laid before me, the accuracy of which no one can impugn." With reference to commercial treaties, he said:—"The whole of the foreign export of our

colonies—an immense commerce—would be disturbed and destroyed if we suddenly got rid of these treaties, or if we got rid of these treaties as soon as we could. I do not think it would be an exaggeration to say—some of these articles are for a long term of years (ten years)—that it might take a quarter of a century to rid ourselves from all this machinery of commercial treaties founded upon the principle of the favoured nation clause. It will then be seen that Reciprocity in the present state of affairs is not the easy remedy which, unfortunately, so many persons have recently commended through the country; nor would it be an immediate relief to the distress from which, no doubt, many people are suffering.” “Reciprocity,” Lord Beaconsfield continued, “was a movement for the imposition of a tariff which should encounter the hostile tariffs of other countries—a movement to meet them with equal duties and equal regulations. But it was not satisfactory to hear that it was to consist of ‘moderate duties.’ One man might think 20 per cent. and another 5 per cent. a moderate duty; and if we were to have a protective system we could not, on the pretext that we were not to tax the food of the people, apply it in some respects and not in others.”

The Conservative Premier saw the great point which was at issue in this attempted revival of the old controversy. The advocates of Reciprocity might protest with all possible vigour that they had no desire or intention to lay any burdens upon the importers of food; but it was plain to men of discernment that it would not be in their power to draw the line. The first step in the process of reaction would be the only difficult one; this taken, the others would be comparatively easy. And it is impossible to forget that the men who profited most by Protection in the last generation, and who would ultimately profit most by it if it were revived, are the landowners who produce the greatest supply of home-grown food.

Unquestionably the manufacturers who export largely to other countries do suffer not a little by the arbitrary tariffs imposed upon them in different parts of the world. But retaliation would not assist them in these foreign markets ; it would only make their case still worse. It might help them a little in the home markets ; but at the same time it would raise the prices on the consumers. A like process applied to articles of food would infallibly reduce the community to something like its former wretched condition of dependence, and we should soon be confronted by the old spectacle of limited classes and individuals flourishing at the cost of the general population.

The reactionists have grown bolder and bolder as the commercial prospects of the country have appeared to deteriorate ; and they certainly have not lacked disciples. In some cases, as at the by-election for Preston in May 1881, a popular vote has seemed to approve the declarations of professed Reciprocitarians.

Mr. Gladstone has more than once, since he assumed the Premiership, exposed the fallacy of those who urge what are called countervailing duties. To a deputation of sugar refiners, who waited on him to describe the injury done to their trade by the French, Austrian, and other prohibitive duties, he replied by showing that it would scarcely be possible, even if it were advantageous, to pay these countries in their own coin. A member of the deputation stated that the sugar refineries were almost ruined, though less than twenty years ago as much as 150,000 tons of loaf sugar had annually been refined in England. Mr. Gladstone remarked on this that "the fact that refineries were closed in one place was not final proof that the trade was declining, because trades very often moved from one part of the country to the other. The shipping trade, for instance, had moved about in the most extraordinary manner. He should like to know of proofs to show that the refining trade in this



country had declined in what he took to be the proper sense, namely, that it employed fewer hands than it did at a previous period. The deputation proposed to remedy this alleged evil by countervailing duties, and claimed justice at the hands of the Government, which was most obvious; but it was not easy for a Government to obtain justice at the hands of a foreign Power for its own people. The deputation tried to show that the Government had the power in its own hands by imposing countervailing duties, but were they prepared to assert that the system of our treaties with foreign countries left our hands free to adopt that measure. We had a great number of treaties containing the most favoured nation clause, and he had always understood that that interposed a very great obstacle to drawing distinctions between bounty-paid and non-bounty-paid sugar or other articles. Did not the question of countervailing duties come to this, that it would necessitate the resettlement of the whole of our commercial treaties, as the general basis of all of them was laid in the terms of the most favoured nation clause? He thought that before the deputation urged upon the Government the adoption of countervailing duties, that preliminary ought to be removed and got out of the way. There was another thing which they ought to consider; and he wanted to know whether in their view this recommendation could be carried into effect without intolerable inconvenience. He should expect them to show him that the refining trade was being taken out of their hands by the reduction of the numbers employed in it, and then he must look to the amount of public inconvenience which the carrying out of the recommendations would cause. He owned to them that his impression was, that the door was entirely closed against them because of the favoured nation clause. He would not, however, admit that the principle was economically sound; but supposing it was so, he would be prevented from using it for the reasons he had mentioned,

as in his opinion the bounties must have been contemplated at the time the treaties were made."

Undoubtedly we have occasionally to pay a heavy price for the maintenance of our commercial treaties, and for our adherence to the principles of Free Trade. But what the Reciprocitarians fail to show us is that we should be improving matters for the community in general if we were to go back to the former state of things.





## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### STATISTICS OF PROGRESS.

THE statistics which follow, compiled chiefly from the invaluable *Financial Reform Almanack*, will serve to illustrate the enormous progress made by Great Britain since the adoption of Free Trade. The eleven tabular statements (A to K) exhibit—(1) the amount of Customs Duties reduced or increased from 1840 to 1879; (2) the value of our Imports and Exports from 1855 to 1879; (3) the value of British Produce exported in triennial periods from 1840 to 1879; (4) the value of Imported Food in 1840 and 1879; (5) the Duties on Articles of consumption still unremitted; (6) the Progress of our Foreign Trade, as affected by Sir Robert Peel's tariff reforms and by the French Commercial Treaty of 1860; (7) the Progress of British Shipping, as compared with that of other nations, since the repeal of the Navigation Laws in 1849; (8) the National Revenue and Expenditure; (9) the quantity of Wheat and other Grain imported at triennial periods from 1840 to 1876; (10) the Progress of the Country in Trade, Revenue, Consumption, and Wealth, between 1840 and the present time; and (11) the Annual Revenue derived by various Countries from Customs Duties.

## A.

CUSTOMS DUTIES Repealed, Reduced, or Increased, from 1840 to 1879,  
showing the course followed in the realisation of Free Trade.

| Year. | Premier.               | Repealed or Reduced. | Imposed or Increased. |
|-------|------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1840  | Lord Melbourne . .     | <i>nil</i>           | £1,060,226            |
| 1841  | Sir Robert Peel . .    | £27,170              | <i>nil</i>            |
| 1842  | " " . .                | 1,498,944            | 160,882               |
| 1843  | " " . .                | 171,521              | <i>nil</i>            |
| 1844  | " " . .                | 286,431              | "                     |
| 1845  | " " . .                | 3,603,561            | "                     |
| 1846  | Lord John Russell      | 1,151,790            | 2,000                 |
| 1847  | " " . .                | 344,886              | <i>nil</i>            |
| 1848  | " " . .                | 585,968              | "                     |
| 1849  | " " . .                | 388,798              | "                     |
| 1850  | " " . .                | 334,151              | "                     |
| 1851  | " " . .                | 801,064              | "                     |
| 1852  | Earl of Derby . .      | 95,928               | "                     |
| 1853  | Lord Aberdeen . .      | 1,499,474            | 16,383                |
| 1854  | " " . .                | 983,107              | 440,643               |
| 1855  | Lord Palmerston . .    | 2,960                | 2,225,907             |
| 1856  | " " . .                | 3,475                | <i>nil</i>            |
| 1857  | " " . .                | 1,628,582            | 92                    |
| 1858  | Earl of Derby . .      | <i>nil</i>           | 9,080                 |
| 1859  | Lord Palmerston . .    | "                    | <i>nil</i>            |
| 1860  | " " . .                | 2,840,931            | 577,904               |
| 1861  | " " . .                | 279,558              | 15,000                |
| 1862  | " " . .                | 98,671               | <i>nil</i>            |
| 1863  | " " . .                | 1,896,319            | 6,811                 |
| 1864  | Earl Russell . .       | 1,744,384            | <i>nil</i>            |
| 1865  | " " . .                | 2,214,981            | 1,576                 |
| 1866  | Earl of Derby . .      | 516,462              | <i>nil</i>            |
| 1867  | " " . .                | <i>nil</i>           | "                     |
| 1868  | Mr. Disraeli . .       | "                    | "                     |
| 1869  | Mr. Gladstone . .      | 865,687              | 114                   |
| 1870  | " " . .                | 2,783,281            | 2,338                 |
| 1871  | " " . .                | 45                   | 131                   |
| 1872  | " " . .                | 243,169              | 64                    |
| 1873  | " " . .                | 1,617,380            | <i>nil</i>            |
| 1874  | Mr. Disraeli . .       | 2,282,903            | "                     |
| 1875  | " " . .                | <i>nil</i>           | "                     |
| 1876  | " " . .                | "                    | "                     |
| 1877  | Earl of Beaconsfield . | "                    | "                     |
| 1878  | " " . .                | "                    | 501,187               |
| 1879  | " " . .                | "                    | <i>nil</i>            |
|       |                        | £30,791,581          | £5,020,278            |

The net reduction in the course of forty years is £25,771,303.

## B.

IMPORTS and EXPORTS from and to British Possessions, and from and to Foreign Countries.

| Year | Imports<br>British Poss. | Exports<br>British Poss. | Imports<br>Foreign. | Exports<br>Foreign. | Grand Totals. |
|------|--------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------|
| 1855 | £33,576,358              | £28,287,326              | £109,959,539        | £87,832,379         | £259,655,602  |
| 1865 | 72,840,797               | 51,546,754               | 198,231,488         | 167,284,822         | 489,903,861   |
| 1875 | 84,423,971               | 76,656,011               | 289,515,606         | 204,957,312         | 655,552,900   |
| 1876 | 84,332,576               | 70,149,889               | 290,822,127         | 186,626,713         | 631,931,305   |
| 1877 | 89,553,998               | 75,752,150               | 304,865,684         | 176,593,870         | 646,765,702   |
| 1878 | 77,936,110               | 71,992,708               | 290,834,632         | 173,491,150         | 614,254,600   |
| 1879 | 78,940,668               | 66,508,973               | 284,051,207         | 182,274,391         | 611,775,239   |

This table indicates the general decline of trade during the past decade ; but it also shows the remarkable increase of trade in the period when Free Trade was producing its natural and unimpeded results.

## C.

VALUE of BRITISH PRODUCE EXPORTED between the years 1840  
and 1879, in triennial periods.

| Years. | To British Possessions. | To Foreign Countries. | Total Exports. |
|--------|-------------------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| 1840   | £17,099,006             | £34,209,734           | £51,308,740    |
| 1843   | 15,965,371              | 36,241,076            | 52,206,447     |
| 1846   | 17,391,541              | 40,395,335            | 57,786,876     |
| 1849   | 16,594,514              | 47,001,511            | 63,596,025     |
| 1852   | 20,284,273              | 57,792,581            | 78,076,854     |
| 1855   | 26,552,875              | 69,135,210            | 95,688,085     |
| 1858   | 40,222,457              | 76,386,299            | 116,608,756    |
| 1861   | 42,245,377              | 82,857,437            | 125,102,814    |
| 1864   | 51,714,418              | 108,734,635           | 160,449,053    |
| 1867   | 49,799,610              | 131,162,313           | 180,961,723    |
| 1870   | 51,814,223              | 147,772,599           | 199,586,822    |
| 1873   | 66,328,471              | 88,836,132            | 255,164,603    |
| 1874   | 72,280,092              | 167,278,029           | 239,558,121    |
| 1875   | 71,092,163              | 152,373,800           | 223,465,963    |
| 1876   | 64,859,224              | 135,779,980           | 200,639,204    |
| 1879   | 61,002,111              | 130,529,647           | 191,531,758    |

## D.

## VALUE OF IMPORTED FOOD, 1840 AND 1879.

|                               |                   | 1840.       | 1879.        |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|-------------|--------------|
| Animals living, viz. :—       |                   |             |              |
| „ Oxen, Bulls, Cows, & Calves | <i>prohibited</i> | .....       | £4,639,431   |
| „ Sheep and Lambs             | <i>prohibited</i> | .....       | 2,252,824    |
| Bacon and Hams                |                   | £14,657     | 8,880,223    |
| Beef                          | <i>prohibited</i> | .....       | 1,937,428    |
| Butter                        |                   | 934,846     | 10,379,451   |
| Cheese                        |                   | 424,616     | 3,824,017    |
| Cocoa and Chocolate           |                   | 73,168      | 1,089,417    |
| Coffee                        |                   | 2,129,114   | 7,089,100    |
| Corn :—Wheat                  |                   | 5,880,480   | 31,468,171   |
| „ Other kinds                 |                   | 2,171,691   | 20,868,455   |
| „ Flour of Wheat, &c.         |                   | 1,391,653   | 8,924,811    |
| Currants                      |                   | 589,651     | 1,475,428    |
| Eggs                          |                   | 220,342     | 2,295,720    |
| Fish                          | <i>prohibited</i> | .....       | 1,652,957    |
| Lard                          |                   | 258         | 1,420,881    |
| Meat, fresh or salted         |                   | .....       | 440,726      |
| „ otherwise preserved         |                   | .....       | 1,690,099    |
| Oranges and Lemons            |                   | 150,137     | 1,317,961    |
| Pork :—Fresh                  | <i>prohibited</i> | .....       | 691,362      |
| „ Salted                      |                   | 58,818      | .....        |
| Potatoes                      |                   | 516         | 2,696,885    |
| Raisins                       |                   | 98,772      | 1,005,628    |
| Rice                          |                   | 277,449     | 3,480,351    |
| Sugar :—Raw                   |                   | 9,053,770   | 17,929,283   |
| „ Refined and Candy           |                   | 25,809      | 4,134,014    |
| „ Molasses and Juice          |                   | 600,949     | 281,258      |
| Tea                           |                   | 3,502,735   | 11,262,593   |
| Total Value                   |                   | £27,597,431 | £153,128,474 |
| Value in 1840                 |                   |             | 27,599,431   |
| Increase in forty years       |                   |             | £125,529,073 |

## E.

UNREMITTED DUTIES on Articles of Consumption in the Year 1879.

| Articles.                                 | Quantity Imported. | Value.     | Duty.       |
|-------------------------------------------|--------------------|------------|-------------|
| Cocoa . .                                 | 26,155,788 lbs.    | £1,089,417 | £46,342     |
| Coffee . .                                | 1,6096,38 cwt.     | 7,089,100  | 205,011     |
| Currants .                                | 1,148,512 ,,       | 1,475,428  | 276,244     |
| Raisins . .                               | 585,538 ,,         | 1,005,628  | 155,385     |
| Spirits . .                               | 13,546,877 gals.   | 3,000,737  | 4,682,926   |
| Tea . . .                                 | 184,076,472 lbs.   | 11,262,593 | 3,698,338   |
| Tobacco . .                               | 92,452,778 ,,      | 1,968,652  | 8,564,913   |
| Wine . .                                  | 15,162,857 gals.   | 5,365,250  | 1,391,211   |
| Total Import Duties on these articles . . |                    |            | £19,020,370 |



## F.

## PROGRESS OF FOREIGN TRADE.

"At the commencement of the period embraced in the table—viz. the year ending 5th January, 1841—the gross produce of Customs and Excise duties was £38,127,406; the gross revenue, which for the year ending the 31st March last was £80,099,051, was then only £51,684,766. The Customs Tariff then comprised some 1200 articles of import subject to duty: the total number of articles and subdivisions of them is now about forty. The Excise Tariff included many articles now happily liberated, such as bricks, glass, candles, soap, paper, etc., etc., etc. In the interim, Custom Duties have been repealed or reduced to the amount of £26,272,430; Excise Duties increased by that of £580,804, leaving a net reduction of £25,691,626. The produce of both, in the year ended the 31st of March last, was £48,452,315, an increase of £10,324,909, compared with their yield in 1840, showing an actual recovery of £36,016,535 from the partial liberation of trade, and affording the greatest possible encouragement to further progress in the same direction, of which proofs may be gathered from the following tables:—

| Before and after Peel's Tariff Reforms. |             |             |             | Before and after French Treaty. |             |             |             |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|---------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Imports.                                |             | Exports.    | Total.      | Imports.                        |             | Exports.    | Total.      |
| £                                       |             | £           | £           | £                               |             | £           | £           |
| 1840..                                  | 62,004,000  | 110,128,716 | 172,132,716 | 1860..                          | 210,530,873 | 164,521,351 | 375,052,224 |
| 1850..                                  | 152,329,053 | 115,821,092 | 268,210,145 | 1876..                          | 375,154,708 | 256,776,602 | 631,931,370 |
| 90,385,053                              |             | 5,692,376   | 96,077,429  | 164,623,835                     |             | 92,255,251  | 256,879,146 |

"The increase of imports was therefore 145 per cent., that of exports 5 per cent., and that of imports and exports 55 per cent., in the first 10 years; that of imports 239 per cent., and of imports and exports 117 per cent., in 20 years; and that of imports 505 per cent., of exports 133 per cent., and that of imports and exports 267 per cent., in 36 years. In face of such facts it is nothing less than marvellous that shipbuilders, shipowners, merchants, manufacturers, and traders generally, of all political parties, are so blind to their own interests as not to demand with one voice the abolition of CUSTOMS and EXCISE, and the establishment of perfect FREEDOM OF TRADE. The theorists who fancy that when what they call 'the Balance of Trade' is against us—i.e. when exports exceed imports, the country is in a bad way—will do well to observe that in 1840, when universal distress prevailed, and the people were starving, our imports were nearly doubled by our exports."—*Financial Reform Almanack*, 1878.

In 1879 the increase of imports and exports over those of 1860 had fallen to £236,723,015.

## G.

## PROGRESS OF BRITISH SHIPPING.

"In 1849 the Protective Navigation Laws were in full force; they were repealed by an Act passed 26th June, 1849, which came into operation on the 1st of January, 1850. The following is an account of the total number of British vessels engaged in the home and foreign trade (exclusive of river steamers) registered at the two periods, and subsequently, with the number of men employed, exclusive of masters. The total number of vessels, including river steamers, registered as belonging to the United Kingdom and the Channel Islands, in 1879, was 25,565, and the tonnage 6,579,975.

|      | Sailing<br>Vessels.<br>Number. | Steamers.<br>Number. | Total<br>Vessels. | Tonnage.  | Men.       |
|------|--------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|-----------|------------|
| 1849 | .. 17,807                      | .. 414               | .. 18,221         | 3,096,342 | .. 152,611 |
| 1851 | .. 17,664                      | .. 520               | .. 18,184         | 3,360,935 | .. 141,937 |
| 1861 | .. 19,288                      | .. 997               | .. 20,285         | 4,359,695 | .. 171,957 |
| 1872 | .. 19,709                      | .. 2,845             | .. 22,554         | 5,761,608 | .. 203,720 |
| 1873 | .. 18,785                      | .. 2,796             | .. 21,581         | 5,748,097 | .. 202,239 |
| 1874 | .. 17,926                      | .. 2,946             | .. 20,872         | 5,884,588 | .. 203,603 |
| 1879 | .. 16,449                      | .. 3,580             | .. 20,029         | 6,249,833 | .. 193,548 |

"Hence it appears that in 1879 there was an increase of 1808 vessels (the total including an increase of 3166 steamers, each of them capable of performing two or three voyages for one of sailing vessels), as compared with 1849; of 3,153,491 tons in their capacity, and of 40,937 in the number of men employed. The following is an account of the tonnage of British and foreign vessels—sailing and steam—entering and clearing, with cargoes and in ballast, at ports in the United Kingdom from and to foreign countries and British possessions:—

## TONNAGE OF VESSELS ENTERED AND CLEARED.

|      | British.      | Foreign.      | Excess of<br>British. |
|------|---------------|---------------|-----------------------|
| 1840 | .. 6,490,485  | .. 2,949,182  | .. 3,541,303          |
| 1854 | .. 10,744,849 | .. 7,924,238  | .. 2,820,611          |
| 1861 | .. 15,420,532 | .. 11,175,109 | .. 4,245,423          |
| 1871 | .. 23,034,748 | .. 13,513,130 | .. 14,521             |
| 1872 | .. 23,719,090 | .. 13,781,935 | .. 14,937,155         |
| 1873 | .. 29,647,344 | .. 14,792,642 | .. 14,750,409         |
| 1874 | .. 30,089,683 | .. 15,339,274 | .. 14,904,702         |
| 1879 | .. 37,433,991 | .. 15,281,459 | .. 22,152,532         |

"Hence it appears that whilst the increase in British tonnage in 1879, compared with 1840, has been 30,943,506 tons, or 476 per cent., that in foreign tonnage has been 12,332,277 tons, or 411 per cent."—*Abbreviated from the "Financial Reform Almanack, 1881."*

## H.

## NATIONAL REVENUE AND EXPENDITURE.

*Receipts.*

|                     | 1850.       | 1871.       | 1874.       | 1877.       | 1880.       |
|---------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
|                     | £           | £           | £           | £           | £           |
| Customs .....       | 22,264,258  | 20,238,880  | 20,323,324  | 29,044,263  | 19,169,605  |
| Excise .....        | 14,965,525  | 22,833,907  | 27,115,970  | 28,408,052  | 25,218,303  |
| Stamps .....        | 7,014,440   | 8,979,729   | 10,463,212  | 11,126,493  | 11,806,914  |
| Income Tax .....    | 5,585,594   | 6,290,611   | 5,641,791   | 5,340,718   | 9,694,606   |
| Land Tax .....      | 4,485,033*  | 1,091,292   | 1,071,991   | 1,084,890   | 1,047,076   |
| Assessed Taxes ..   |             | 1,633,919   | 1,252,465   | 1,460,462   | 1,601,960   |
| Post Office .....   | 2,156,563   | 4,917,098   | 5,481,297   | 6,021,267   | 6,548,778   |
| Telegraphs .....    | ..          | 697,933     | 1,057,824   | 1,607,050   | 1,438,014   |
|                     | 56,472,313  | 66,683,371  | 72,407,874  | 75,093,195  | 75,525,258  |
| Crown Lands .....   | 160,000     | 446,151     | 463,241     | 488,295     | 470,216     |
| Miscellaneous ..... | 753,345     | 3,229,220   | 3,706,764   | 4,517,561   | 5,280,933   |
| Totals .....        | £57,385,658 | £70,358,743 | £76,577,879 | £80,099,051 | £81,276,407 |

\* Includes Assessed Taxes since transferred to Excise.

*Expenditure.*

|                                       | 1850.       | 1871.       | 1874.       | 1877.       | 1880.       |
|---------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
|                                       | £           | £           | £           | £           | £           |
| Interest, &c., of Debt ..             | 28,323,961  | 26,826,437  | 26,706,726  | 27,992,833  | ..          |
| Army } including all                  | 8,881,140   | 13,430,400  | 15,940,965  | 15,921,734  | ..          |
| Navy } Charges.                       | 6,942,397   | 9,456,641   | 10,279,899  | 11,364,383  | ..          |
| Fortifications and Localisation ..... | ..          | 150,000     | 500,000     | 900,000     | ..          |
| Totals, Debt and War ..               | 44,147,498  | 49,863,478  | 53,427,590  | 56,178,950  | 59,444,476  |
| Civil Charges .....                   | 6,978,808   | 13,309,510  | 17,067,609  | 14,928,891  | ..          |
| Collection of Revenue ..              | 4,161,226   | 6,522,550   | 6,471,311   | 8,000,588   | ..          |
| Totals .....                          | £55,287,532 | £69,995,538 | £76,966,510 | £79,108,429 | £84,364,753 |

Commenting on such figures as these, the *Financial Reform Almanack* asks:—  
 "Is it not monstrous that so large a proportion of the public income should be derived from taxes which press heavily on the masses, and render our boasted Freedom of Trade an empty mockery, and that so much of the expenditure is devoted to unproductive purposes? But, bad as it is, this is not the worst. There are many other taxes besides duties of Customs and Excise which tend directly to cripple trade and industry, and deprive the people of employment; and if a due proportion of these were credited to the shoulders of those who bear a very considerable part of them, and crown lands, post-office, and many of the miscellaneous receipts were deducted, it would be found that to every pound of revenue from taxes, properly so called, these improvident imposts contribute 15s. at the very least. Moreover, purchasers of taxed commodities have to pay

some fifty per cent. beyond what the Government receives to the retailers thereof; and we have in addition to maintain a whole army of Customs and Excise officers by land, and great ships of war with fleets of smaller vessels at sea, for the protection of this most pernicious system. Even this is not all, for the obstructions, loss of time, employment of otherwise unnecessary labour, and other results of Customs and Excise regulations—many of the most absurd, as well as of the most annoying nature, are attended with additional cost, and are so many shackles on what is nevertheless called Freedom of Trade. Yet merchants, shipowners, traders, manufacturers, and others subject to them, not merely bend patiently under the yoke, but fondly imagine that trade is free, and are blind to the immense extension of it which would inevitably result from its entire enfranchisement. Chambers of Commerce and Agriculture busy themselves with comparatively trivial details, and, with exceptions that might be counted on half one's fingers, are utterly indifferent to this which ought to be with them the 'question of questions,' inasmuch as, properly weighed, it is more important to them individually, and to the nation collectively, than all the matters with which they have hitherto busied themselves, or may busy themselves hereafter. It is also one of vital interest to artizans, mechanics, operatives, and labourers with hand or head of every degree, who have hitherto been as indifferent to it as Chambers of Commerce and their constituents. It is beyond all doubt that if trade were really free with all the world there would be employment for every able-bodied man in the three kingdoms, and for more of them than we could muster, with ample remuneration for it."

## I.—QUANTITIES OF WHEAT and other GRAIN IMPORTED at Triennial Periods, from 1840 to 1876 inclusive.

(Compiled from *Statistical Abstracts*.—"Financial Reform Almanack.")

In this Table are shown the quantities of Grain, Flour, and Meal imported during *nine* years under the old Corn Law; during *twenty* years under the Shilling Duty, and most onerous restrictions on the Trade, which were calculated, if not intended, to discourage the importation of foreign food; and during *seven* years from the time when the Corn Laws were really repealed, some three-and-twenty years after the dissolution of the Anti-Corn Law League.

| Year.                      | Wheat and<br>Wheat-<br>Flour. | Barley.     | Oats.       | Maize or<br>Indian<br>Corn. | Rye.      | Buck-<br>wheat. | Bere<br>or Bigg. | Peas.      | Beans.     | Total of<br>all kinds. |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------------------|-----------|-----------------|------------------|------------|------------|------------------------|
|                            | Cwts.                         | Cwts.       | Cwts.       | Cwts.                       | Cwts.     | Cwts.           | Cwts.            | Cwts.      | Cwts.      | Cwts.                  |
| 1840 .....                 | 10,560,290                    | 2,333,707   | 1,437,024   | 99,703                      | 13,804    | 2,732           | ....             | 713,187    | 554,653    | 15,765,100             |
| 1843 .....                 | 4,619,917                     | 640,286     | 231,888     | 2,216                       | 20,184    | 7               | ....             | 217,363    | 205,646    | 5,937,507              |
| 1846 .....                 | 10,195,930                    | 1,324,432   | 2,170,682   | 3,024,383                   | 7,300     | 81,954          | ....             | 956,781    | 1,093,059  | 18,855,021             |
| 1849 .....                 | 20,850,604                    | 4,932,172   | 3,434,541   | 9,533,396                   | 996,589   | 1,096           | ....             | 1,054,647  | 1,962,570  | 42,818,626             |
| 1852 .....                 | 13,092,627                    | 2,234,071   | 2,720,539   | 6,305,472                   | 41,292    | 28,871          | ....             | 478,773    | 1,589,623  | 31,491,268             |
| 1855 .....                 | 13,040,322                    | 1,246,882   | 2,842,749   | 5,208,570                   | 9,769     | 1,214           | ....             | 510,655    | 1,473,349  | 25,246,425             |
| 1858 .....                 | 23,200,941                    | 5,933,543   | 5,104,773   | 7,503,536                   | 423,873   | 13,022          | 3,125            | 710,888    | 1,765,847  | 44,664,548             |
| 1861 .....                 | 37,046,705                    | 6,001,432   | 6,114,398   | 13,244,366                  | 224,298   | 2,550           | 1,857            | 1,799,095  | 2,402,276  | 65,430,277             |
| 1864 .....                 | 28,837,203                    | 4,921,362   | 6,562,959   | 6,235,938                   | 476,381   | 4,833           | 25,451           | 1,114,083  | 909,270    | 48,137,432             |
| 1867 .....                 | 39,136,780                    | 5,633,721   | 9,407,136   | 8,540,429                   | 100,457   | 348,588         | 3,169            | 1,586,129  | 1,982,615  | 67,759,024             |
| 1870 .....                 | 36,906,115                    | 7,217,327   | 10,830,630  | 16,756,733                  | 251,229   | 3,517           | ....             | 1,798,354  | 1,505,798  | 75,270,753             |
| 1873 .....                 | 51,631,197                    | 9,241,063   | 11,907,702  | 18,823,431                  | 61,771    | 37,463          | ....             | 1,190,337  | 2,982,064  | 95,876,528             |
| 1876 .....                 | 51,904,433                    | 9,772,945   | 11,211,019  | 39,963,369                  | 132,366   | 37,739          | ....             | 1,611,250  | 4,807,555  | 119,240,676            |
| Totals, 1840 to 1848 9 yrs | 94,333,317                    | 16,836,443  | 14,852,196  | 25,914,926                  | 822,828   | 187,560         | 4,990            | 6,519,168  | 9,099,729  | 167,620,057            |
| " 1849 " 1869 20 "         | 583,018,433                   | 109,729,801 | 108,698,541 | 183,352,135                 | 6,390,673 | 1,080,415       | 103,131          | 19,234,121 | 35,616,240 | 1,046,123,490          |
| " 1870 " 1876 6 "          | 341,286,182                   | 72,231,827  | 88,224,618  | 155,033,381                 | 1,641,841 | 383,413         | 1,126            | 10,349,676 | 20,854,950 | 682,006,913            |
| " for the whole period     | 1,018,637,932                 | 198,848,071 | 203,685,255 | 384,300,442                 | 7,844,842 | 1,651,388       | 109,246          | 35,102,965 | 65,670,919 | 1,895,751,060          |

## J.

PROGRESS of the COUNTRY in TRADE, REVENUE, CONSUMPTION, and WEALTH, between 1840 and 1878. — (From Mr. Mongredien's *Free Trade Movement in England*.)

“TRADE.—In 1840 the foreign trade of the United Kingdom (combined exports and imports) amounted to £172,133,000, equivalent to £6, 9s. 11½d. per head of the population. In 1878 it amounted to £614,255,000, or £18, 3s. 6d. per head, a marvellous rate of increase ! In the United States the proportion of foreign trade to the population is £4, 13s. per head. In France it was, in 1876, £8, 3s. per head. In Russia it was, in 1876, £1, 9s. per head.

“REVENUE.—The public revenue for the year 1840 was £51,850,000 ; for the year 1878, £81,598,000 ; and the latter sum presses far less heavily on the people now than did the former sum on the people then. The income-tax in 1843 (the first year of its incidence) yielded, for every penny in the pound, £801,000. In 1878 the taxable incomes had so increased that every penny in the pound of income-tax yielded £1,947,000.

“CONSUMPTION PER HEAD.—Of those articles which are partly produced at home and partly imported, the consumption per head cannot be exactly ascertained, because the extent of the home production cannot be accurately defined. But of those articles consumed by the people, which are wholly imported from abroad, the consumption per head is easily calculated, and it is as follows for the two years which we have taken for comparison :—

CONSUMPTION PER HEAD OF POPULATION OF THE UNITED KINGDOM, IN 1840 AND 1878, OF THE FOLLOWING ARTICLES :—

|                                | 1840.     | 1878.     |
|--------------------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Tea . . . . .                  | 1·22 lbs. | 4·66 lbs. |
| Sugar (raw) . . . . .          | 15·20 „   | 48·56 „   |
| Coffee . . . . .               | 1·08 „    | 0·97 „    |
| Rice . . . . .                 | 0·90 „    | 7·50 „    |
| Currants and Raisins . . . . . | 1·45 „    | 4·49 „    |
| Tobacco . . . . .              | 0·86 „    | 1·45 „    |

“WEALTH.—An eminent statist, Mr. R. Giffen, has, by a series of elaborate calculations, arrived at the conclusion that in 1875 the total capital of the people of the United Kingdom might be reckoned as a minimum at £8,500,000,000. ‘This,’ he says, ‘is the capitalised value of the income derived from capital, using as far as possible the

date of the income-tax returns as the basis of the estimate, and with the addition of an estimate of the amount of capital in use not yielding an income.' By a similar process he has made out that the total capital of the country in 1865 was £6,100,000,000, and consequently, that during the intervening ten years the national estate had improved at the rate of £240,000,000 per annum. In 1875 the amount assessed to the income-tax was £571,000,000; in 1865 it was £396,000,000. Now in 1843, when the income-tax was imposed, the amount assessed to it was only £251,000,000. Let us then take the proportion between the taxable income and the national capital, as given by Mr. Giffen for the two periods 1865 and 1875, and apply to the £251,000,000 taxable income of 1843, and we shall find that it gives £3,880,000,000 as the total capital of the country in 1843. This, of course, is only an approximate valuation, but it cannot be far wrong, and it leads to the conclusion that the capital of the country has far more than doubled since 1840, while the increase of the population has only been 28 per cent. This enormous mass of wealth makes our national debt an easy burden compared with its pressure in 1840, and the process of accumulation is still going on at the average rate of at least £200,000,000 per annum."

## K.

The following table shows, in order of magnitude, the Annual Revenue derived by various countries from Customs Duties, according to the latest returns available :—

|                         |             |
|-------------------------|-------------|
| United States . . . . . | £26,200,000 |
| Great Britain . . . . . | 20,000,000  |
| France . . . . .        | 10,250,000  |
| Germany . . . . .       | 5,330,000   |
| Russia . . . . .        | 5,300,000   |
| Italy . . . . .         | 4,240,000   |
| British India . . . . . | 2,700,000   |
| Austria . . . . .       | 2,320,000   |
| Portugal . . . . .      | 1,850,000   |
| Spain . . . . .         | 1,600,000   |
| Sweden . . . . .        | 1,200,000   |
| Denmark . . . . .       | 1,100,000   |
| Belgium . . . . .       | 865,000     |
| Holland . . . . .       | 385,000     |

—Sir L. MALLET (*Letter on Reciprocity*).















